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4 GOINGS ON

7 THE TALK OF THE TOWN
Benjamin Wallace-Wells on the Democrats' plans; John Leguizamo goes Homeric; drinks with liberty; brain-surgeon softball; a Milli Vanilli comeback.

AMERICAN CHRONICLES

Mike Spies 12 Parting Shot
A widow, the N.R.A., and the gun-suicide crisis.

SHOUTS & MURMURS

Sterling Hoyte 19 Exit Memo

DEPT. OF SCIENCE

Rivka Galchen 20 Picture This
A new color, olo, can be seen but not depicted.

LETTER FROM ISRAEL

David Remnick 26 Breaking Ranks
Gadi Eisenkot's campaign to unseat Netanyahu.

PROFILES

Molly Young 38 American Daredevil
Johnny Knoxville and the "Jackass" mentality.

FICTION

Sheila Heti 46 "Earthly Delights"

THE CRITICS

POP MUSIC

Amanda Petrusich 51 *The charms of Steve Lacy's R. & B.*

BOOKS

53 Briefly Noted
Dayna Tortorici 54 *Emily Eakin's "The Frenchmen: Or, My Life in Theory."*
Kelefa Sanneh 58 *Are food deserts a myth?*

THE THEATRE

Emily Nussbaum 62 *"Dukes," "Big Feelings."*

THE CURRENT CINEMA

Justin Chang 64 *Gregg Araki's "I Want Your Sex."*

POEMS

Natalie Shapero 30 "Any Younger"
Michael Dickman 48 "Tick Check"

COVER

Pierre-Emmanuel Lyet "Repose"

DRAWINGS *Elisabeth McNair, Lonnie Millsap, Liana Finck, Sophie Lucido Johnson and Sammi Skolmoski, Jeremy Nguyen, Patrick McKelvie, Frank Cotham, Ali Solomon, Edward Steed, Maddie Dai, Rusty Epstein and Ian Goldstein, Paul Noth, Lindsey Budde, Benjamin Schwartz* SPOTS *Jeffrey Fisher*

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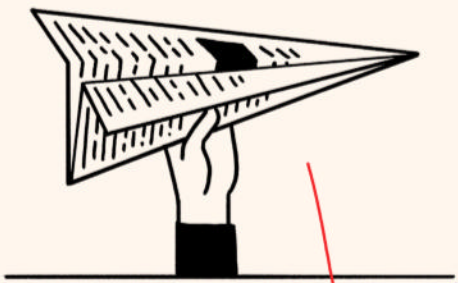

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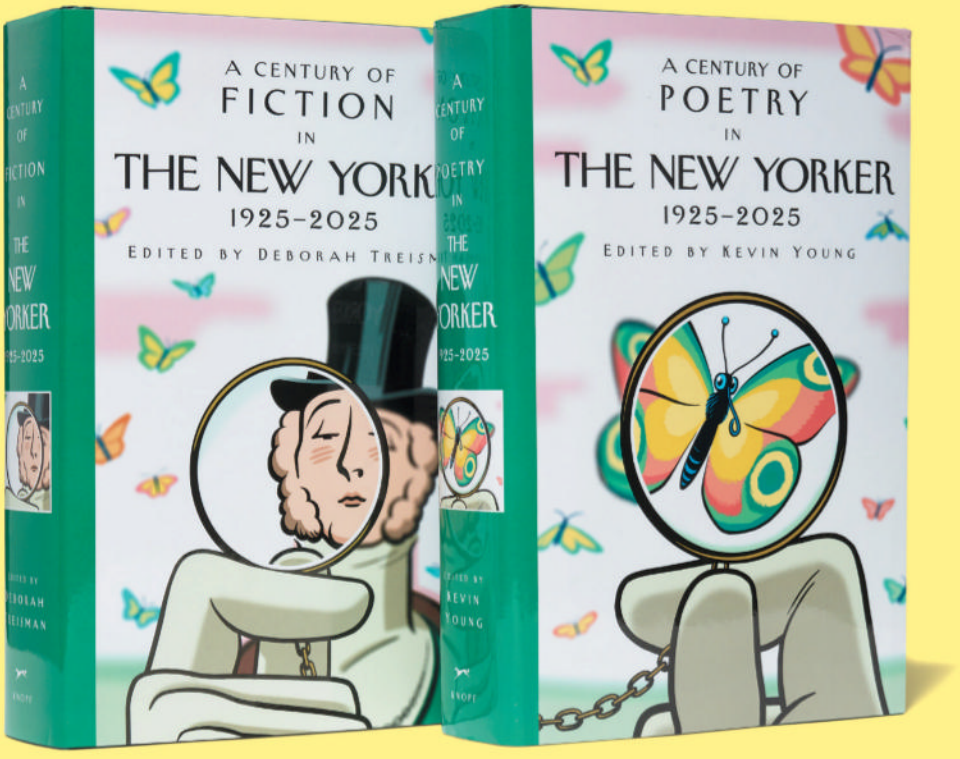

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GOINGS ON

JULY 29 – AUGUST 4, 2026

What we're watching, listening to, and doing this week.

Can you really say that you've seen a summer show in New York City until you've sat through at least one performance in brain-liquefying humidity? **Little Island's** reef of shows, July 29-Sept. 6, may be sparser this year, but its programming remains brain-tinglingly eclectic. The lineup features Anthony Roth Costanzo's maximalist spin on minimalist music; an acoustic celebration of the Harlem Renaissance, curated by Louis Cato; Qween Jean's third annual Summer Legacy Ball; and a new show by Julio Torres, "Marina," about a sea wench (Martine Gutierrez) searching for love. Several food-focussed events beckon at the smaller-scale Glade, and in early September Laurie Anderson and others mark the centenary of Allen Ginsberg's birth.—*Rhoda Feng*

ABOUT TOWN

OFF OFF BROADWAY | Housing Works Bookstore is an inspired setting for a revival of **"The Gin Game,"** D. L. Coburn's Pulitzer-winning play, from 1978, about two residents of a scruffy nursing home who strike up a tentative friendship. Ashley Basile's spare set—table and chairs, green couch—quietly evokes lives pared down to their bare essentials. Weller (Arliss Howard) teaches Fonsia (Debra Winger) to play gin rummy—and then proceeds to lose every round, along with his temper. In life, they've both been dealt bad hands: Fonsia has chronic diabetes and a son who never visits, and Weller still fumes over failed business dealings. David Blum directs with a light, Shiatsu-like touch, allowing Howard and Winger to suggest that you're only as sick as your need to keep sanctimonious tabs on others' secrets.—*Rhoda Feng (Through Aug. 14.)*

DANCE | In the first half of the nineteen-seventies, Philadelphia International Records created a sound that came to be known as Philly soul. Embodied by the O'Jays, Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes, Lou Rawls, and others, it was grown-up and plush, but still grooving—the seedbed for the sizzle of disco, with an emphasis on Black pride. During **Philadanco!'s** latest visit to the Joyce, Rennie Harris, Philadelphia's master of putting street dance on the concert stage, offers a love letter to his city, set to a soundtrack of the city's own brand of soul. The company's agile, eager dancers also dig into works by Christopher Huggins and Tommie-Waheed Evans.—*Brian Seibert (Joyce Theatre; July 29-Aug. 2.)*

DANCE | Born in the panic-stricken days of the pandemic, the **BAAND Together Dance Festival** has become a mainstay of Lincoln Center's feel-good summer offerings. Dancers from Ballet Hispánico, Alvin Ailey, American Ballet Theatre, New York City Ballet, and Dance Theatre of Harlem share a stage, bringing something from each company's repertory, as to a potluck. Alvin Ailey presents a lovely, mournful duet by Judith Jamison, "A Case of You," set to Joni Mitchell. Adrian Danchig-Waring and Taylor Stanley, of N.Y.C.B., perform Lar Lubovitch's ever-flowing same-sex duet "Each in Their Own Time," to Brahms. The one novelty is "Zephyr," a pas de deux by Claire Davison, a dancer at A.B.T.—*Marina Harss (David H. Koch; July 28-Aug. 1.)*

INDIE ROCK | While attending the Etobicoke School of the Arts, in Toronto, the singer and multi-instrumentalist Emily Haines met Kevin Drew and Amy Millan, inextricably linking the three artists as confederates. Haines and Millan played together at school, before growing into separate bands: **Metric** and **Stars,** respectively. In 1999, Drew co-founded the music collective **Broken Social Scene** with his fellow singer and guitarist Brendan Canning, counting several members of the two units among its creative lineups. The three groups—which all navigate a pop-and-rock divide that has, gradually, started to close—are now overlapping institutions of the Canadian indie scene, making their assembly for the "All the Feelings" tour more of a convivial get-together than a full-blown reunion.—*Sheldon Pearce (Brooklyn Paramount; July 30-31.)*

MOVIES | The extraordinary adventure of Flaco the Owl, who escaped from the Central Park Zoo in February, 2023, is recounted in fanatical detail in Penny Lane's documentary **"Wild Inside."** The story is essentially crowdsourced, composed largely of footage and photos shot by dozens of devoted owlers who tracked the bird's tenuous début on the loose, his steep learning curve as he started hunting in the park, his new life as a celebrity, and his perilous journeys through Manhattan. Lane fills out the tale with wide-ranging interviews, done on location, with enthusiasts and scientists; the result is an invigorating philosophical exploration of animal life, a vision of the modern media spotlight, and a symphonic outpouring of the energy, passion, and knowledge that make the city run.—*Richard Brody (Screening July 29 in Central Park; opening July 31 at IFC Center.)*

OFF BROADWAY | Jennifer Nettles's new musical, **"Giulia: The Poison Queen of Palermo"**—based on the legend of the eponymous seventeenth-century Sicilian apothecary (played by Nettles) who dispatches her abusive husband and supplies other women with the means to escape their own unhappy marriages—is ambitious and intermittently captivating. Sumptuous staging, by Mary Zimmerman, evokes the brooding chiaroscuro of Artemisia Gentileschi's paintings, while Didi Romero relishes every commedia dell'arte lazzo as the big-haired Duchessa. Musically, the show straddles the styles of "Hamilton" hip-hop and the fatally thesis-driven "Suffs." Vitoria (Naomi Serrano), Giulia's daughter, disapproves of her mother's actions, but her motivations are tidied away by the end, with a resolution of sub-"Sweeney Todd" vengeance.—*R.F. (PAC NYC; through Aug. 2.)*

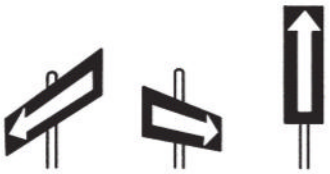
ILLUSTRATION BY KATI SZILÁGYI

ON AND OFF THE AVENUE

Sweating with the Crowd

Last month, the restaurant-review site *The Infatuation* published its quarterly report, surveying the food trends currently dominating New York City, in which its writers noted a particularly distressing phenomenon that they dubbed "The Same-ification of NYC." The dining routines of many city dwellers, the report read, have become tediously predictable: "Coffee at Blank Street. Lunch at Pura Vida. Dinner at Little Ruby's and drinks at Le Dive. . . . One-offs are turning into mini-chains, mini-chains are evolving into chains, and every neighborhood is starting to look identical." More and more, it seems, we are entering a period of peak urban hive mind, a malady that is not limited to everyone visiting the same frozen-yogurt spots. Same-ification has extended to street style, as well; as the reporter Brock Colyar noted in their viral "West Village Girls" story for *New York*, in 2025, a cadre of youths bounds around below Fourteenth Street seemingly all swaddled in white baby tees, ballet flats, and baggy, low-rise jeans. (The popularity of the last continues unabated; this month, Hailey Bieber released a capsule collection of relaxed, belly-baring denim with Gap, which sold out in hours.) Lately, I've noticed that the monotony is especially pernicious when it comes to gymwear. I see woman after woman pass me on the street wearing matching (and often quite pricey) workout sets—typically, a pair of high-waisted bike shorts and a strappy sports bra—from global spandex juggernauts such as **Lululemon, Alo, Varley,** and **Vuori**. The colors vary, but not much: there is a preponderance of chocolate brown, butter yellow, and chalky lilac. There can be small variances—some women layer two bras, or swap their shorts for leggings, or (gasp!) dare to wear different shades on top and bottom—but, in general, the fitness crowd has never looked more homogeneous. On the one hand, I yearn for visual stimulation. Give me garish leopard-print unitards! Give me Jane Fonda-esque neon leg warmers! Give me belted bodysuits à la mid-century Helena Rubinstein! On the other, I get it. You have to wear *something* to Pilates, and a matching set is the quickest way to feel put together. So if you're ready to hop on the bandwagon with the wellness gang, but you want to branch out a tiny bit from the superchains, you may want to look at sets from **Daughter Lessons,** a rising N.Y.C.-based brand founded by two former-competitive-dancer sisters; **Splits59,** an L.A.-based brand popular with ballerinas; or **Literary Sport,** a surging high-end runningwear line from Canada. These looks may cost you (a pair of basic running shorts from Literary Sport is $275), but at least you'll have something different—until everyone else has it, too.

—Rachel Syme



PICK THREE

Sarah Larson on the summer's best podcasts.

1. "**Dan Taberski's Manifesto**" argues that, done right, a manifesto is a nonviolent call to action, an "artful scream"—and, perhaps, just what we need right now. Taberski ("Missing Richard Simmons") studies significant cris de cœur—by such figures as Luigi Mangione, the late Mohawk activist Richard Oakes (pictured), and the punk musician Kathleen Hanna—and develops theories about how to compose a good one. It's a refreshing response to a cultural moment that has many of us, as Taberski says of himself, "seething underneath, all the time."

2. I wasn't expecting **"OnlyFantasy,"** a series about the OnlyFans adult-content phenomenon, to be quite so moving and revelatory. Leon Neyfakh, the veteran journalist-podcaster, and Gracie Canaan, an insightful comedian and an OnlyFans creator herself, co-host, sensitively interviewing fans, creators, and behind-the-scenes workers to understand the psychology of OnlyFans intimacy. Much of the fantasy, we discover, is emotional, and we can hear it in the vulnerability of interviewees' voices.

3. **"The Gaza Chef,"** from the German newspaper *Die Zeit* and its personable investigative journalist Yassin Musharbash, tells the story of Mahmoud Almadhoun, a young Palestinian cook who ran a soup kitchen in the Gaza Strip, and was killed by an Israeli projectile, in 2024. Almadhoun had been a reporting source of Musharbash's; when Musharbash learns of Almadhoun's death, he launches an extraordinary remote investigation into what happened and why. The results feel vivid and immediate, revealing much about survival efforts in Gaza and raising unnerving questions about modern warfare, including the use of A.I.

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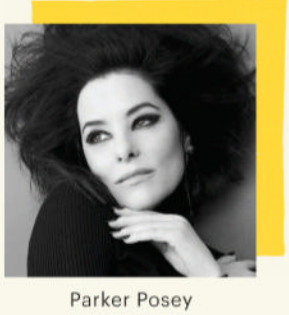

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THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
WHICH WAY NOW?

At seven-fifteen in the morning on Monday, July 13th, when Democrats in Maine were in the midst of a hastily created process to find a replacement for Graham Platner, who had just withdrawn as their nominee for the U.S. Senate race, a security camera in the city of Biddeford captured a white Kia circling slowly through an intersection. The driver, a twenty-five-year-old immigrant from Colombia named Joan Sebastián Durán Guerrero, had been shot and killed by an ICE agent. This winter, after federal agents killed two people during an immigration crackdown in Minneapolis, Democrats were able to say that the mass protests they supported in response had forced ICE to retreat. Now, as the prospective candidates in Maine rushed to express their outrage at Guerrero's death, it was obvious that the retreat had been temporary.

The fast-approaching 2026 midterm elections present the Democrats with both an opportunity and a crisis. The opportunity exists because President Donald Trump is unpopular, has failed to stop the rise in consumer prices that helped doom his predecessor, and seems unable to end the aimless war in Iran that he started. Americans now tell pollsters that they are more likely to vote for Democrats than for Republicans this fall. The crisis is that a narrow victory may not be sufficient to dislodge Trumpism, which is now deeply entrenched in government. And, though the Democratic leadership is looking to recapture the resistance spirit of 2018, its defining problem is a long-standing one in the Party of how to manage the movement that Senator Bernie Sanders started a decade ago, whose populist appeal and generational momentum it needs in this anti-institutional moment but whose principles it does not fully share.

That tension has been most vividly on view in Maine, where the Republican senator Susan Collins is now seeking a sixth term in a state that Kamala Harris won by more than six points in 2024. Platner's emergence there last year had the quality of myth. A couple of left-wing political operatives saw Platner, an oyster farmer, in a local video opposing the development of a corporate salmon farm in Frenchman Bay, and matched his name to records of donors to Sanders's campaigns. Platner, they learned, was also a harbormaster and a veteran of two Marine combat tours in Iraq and an Army tour in Afghanistan.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY CRISTIANA COUCEIRO; SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHS FROM GETTY

One of the operatives reportedly e-mailed colleagues that Platner was "one of the most talented politicians of our time. Maybe any time"; both Sanders and Senator Elizabeth Warren endorsed him. He did turn out to be a commanding barnstormer, a foul-mouthed and fluent denouncer of wealth and corruption, whose appeal drove the sitting governor of Maine, Janet Mills, out of the race. But his candidacy collapsed in a series of scandals, involving first a Nazi-associated tattoo and offensive posts, then allegations of bad behavior toward women, and, finally, untenably, an accusation of rape. Platner denied it, but he dropped out.

One theory heard often in politics is that the Democrats are repeating, in ideological inverse, the experience of the Republicans in 2010, when the Tea Party overtook the G.O.P., eventually clearing the way for Trump. ("Warning for Democrats' Future Is Lurking in GOP's Past," a *USA Today* headline put it, with impressive concision.) Such takes refer to a parallel not just in the rise of populists like Platner but also in primary upsets of powerful incumbents by radical newcomers affiliated with the Democratic Socialists of America. The chair of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, Representative Adriano Espaillat, of New York City, and Representative Diana DeGette, of Denver, a progressive stalwart, were defeated by young insurgents, Darializa Avila Chevalier and Melat Kiros, respectively, who came out of the Gaza protest movement and the D.S.A., and who took some positions far outside the mainstream. (During an interview with the online publication

The New York Editorial Board, Chevalier declined to specify whether her support of prison abolition meant that a man who randomly killed another man should not be sent to prison.) A columnist for *The Atlantic* wrote, "The D.S.A. is a parasite."

That reaction perhaps suggests that there have been more of these upsets than is the case. In races where an incumbent congressional Democrat has lost this year, anger over Gaza has played a role, and in each of them the issue has drawn both donations and attention. But across the country only five Democratic incumbents have lost primaries—two of them because of redistricting—which does not really add up to a revolution. An alternative theory to the Tea Party one is that the general sense of emergency in 2026 has led Democrats, and especially the rising young figures hoping to lead the Party, to embrace political pragmatism.

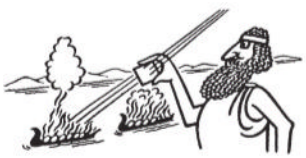
This summer, two politicians have caught the attention of the Party's base, both of whom are under forty. On the left, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, of New York, pointedly declined to endorse Platner—even before the rape accusation, she called the mounting claims against him "hard to stomach"—and has been favorably cited by David Axelrod, Barack Obama's political guru, for echoing the former President's themes of hope and change. From the center, Jon Ossoff, running for reëlection to the Senate in Georgia, spoke critically of the Gaza war early on, and has focussed a controlled campaign on the President's corruption, a traditional populist theme. These approaches seem to be working: in an Emerson 2028 Presidential-primary poll, Ocasio-Cortez and Ossoff were tied for third place, just behind Pete Buttigieg and Gavin Newsom.

Such political talent is rare. In Maine, to replace Platner, the Democrats eventually settled on Troy Jackson, the most organized of the prospects. A former logger who finished third in this year's gubernatorial primary, Jackson lacked Platner's ability to excite the public, but he was preferred by supporters of Sanders, who had endorsed him for governor. (Collins called Jackson a "Bernie bro.") And, having spent six years as the president of the state Senate, he was palatable to the Party establishment. Last week, Jackson tweeted that Collins had "helped destroy Roe v. Wade, she advanced Trump's $990 billion Medicaid cuts, and she gave ICE $70 billion to continue its rogue terror campaigns." Political pabulum, yes, but maybe also a preview of what the Democrats' campaigns this fall will offer: not exactly transformation, not even resolution, just a dogged and prosaic insistence that things in the country are going very badly.

—Benjamin Wallace-Wells

THE PICTURES

A NOBLE FELLOW



Now that moviegoers have Odyssey fever, thanks to Christopher Nolan's blockbuster, audiences are revisiting characters that they first encountered in English class: wily warriors, cool monsters, island temptresses. Be honest, though. Did you remember Eumaeus, Odysseus' faithful swineherd, who waits in Ithaca for his master's return? Neither did John Leguizamo, when Nolan took him out to lunch a while back, at the Odeon, and offered him the role. "I was trying not to eat, because I spit a lot," Leguizamo recalled recently. "He said, 'You're going to play the most loyal character in Western literature.' I was, like, Wow, that's a big deal!"

Leguizamo, who grew up in Bogotá and Queens, had read the Odyssey at Murry Bergtraum High School, near One Police Plaza. "I didn't really pay attention," he said, at a Mediterranean restaurant on Lexington Avenue. He wore a tight black T-shirt and chains around his neck, and held a napkin over his lips to avoid spritzing. "I was just about hanging out—girls, partying, and being comical and whatnot." At nineteen, he reread the epic on his own time. "I was trying to save myself, because I'd been working at Kentucky Fried Chicken for two years," he went on. In the nineties, he made his name performing impish one-man shows such as "Mambo Mouth" and "Spic-O-Rama," placing himself, like the ancient singers of the Odyssey, in the oral tradition.

Lately, Leguizamo has been reading Daniel Mendelsohn's translation of Homer, which describes Eumaeus as a "noble fellow." Nolan had his own take on the character. He put Leguizamo, who is a spry sixty-six, in old-man makeup and cataract-clouded contacts, and had his hair bleached white. "It burned my eyebrows the first time," Leguizamo said. He spent most days on set covered in filth. "I felt very fugly," he recalled. "I was, like, Oh, my God, everybody looks incredible! Matt Damon looks fit as fuck. Tom Holland looks handsome as shit. I look like a gelded you-know-what." He shot many of his scenes at a cliffside castle in Sicily, acting alongside pigs and donkeys and oxen—which had to be helicoptered uphill—and also the Portuguese podengos that split the role of Odysseus' hound, Argus. "It's an ancient breed," he said. "I call it Portuguese *pendejo*, because it's not the brightest dog in the world. *Pendejo* is Spanish for 'dopey.'"

After lunch, Leguizamo walked over to Hixenbaugh Ancient Art, a gallery on Sixtieth Street. He was greeted by its proprietor, Randall Hixenbaugh, in a room filled with busts, pots, and helmets. Leguizamo had worried that Hixenbaugh was a tomb raider, but the dealer, in an oxford shirt and khakis, assured him that the artifacts—from Greece, Rome, Egypt,

John Leguizamo

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

and Mesopotamia—came from preëxisting collections. Hixenbaugh opened a display case and took out a ceramic vase from the late Bronze Age, roughly Odysseus' time. "This is what's called a stirrup vessel," he explained. "This probably would have been for flavoring for wine."

He tried handing it to Leguizamo. "Oh, no, I'm too afraid," the actor said, flinching.

"That's the fun, I think, of collecting ancient art—it's not all sacrosanct," Hixenbaugh said. He turned to a wine amphora from Athens, circa 460 B.C., painted with a tunicked soldier leaving home.

"Now, why is this guy naked and the other guy not?" Leguizamo asked, pointing to another amphora. "Is he a god?"

"Yeah, this is Dionysus," Hixenbaugh said. "Really important men are often naked, too, like Alexander the Great."

Nearby was a small Roman figure of Odysseus, from the first century A.D. Leguizamo's eyes bulged at the seventy-five-thousand-dollar price tag. "That's almost my whole salary for the movie!" he said. "If it was cheaper, I'd give it to Matt."

Toward the back was a wall of ancient Greek armor, including helmets, shields, and ankle guards (to protect those Achilles tendons). They looked at a bronze breastplate from the fourth century B.C., detailed with a belly button and pert nipples. "This would have scared the hell out of opponents," Hixenbaugh said. "Imagine if the Greeks were fighting some barbarians who don't have armor, and this guy looks like he's made out of metal."

"A robot!" Leguizamo said.

The Bronze Age Greeks, Hixenbaugh explained, had a limited geography. "The Odyssey's all about that. Odysseus is exploring the bounds of the Bronze Age Greek world, and it's very mysterious. They didn't know quite what was over the horizon."

"I'm going to tell Chris Nolan he should have talked to you," Leguizamo said. He predicted that the movie would send Hixenbaugh customers. The New York première was that night, and Leguizamo spotted a gift for Nolan: a silver coin, from the Aegean isle of Thásos, circa 140-110 B.C., minted with the wreathed head of Dionysus and priced at a reasonable seven hundred and fifty dollars. "You take credit cards?" he asked.

—Michael Schulman

SEMIQUINCENTENNIAL DEPT.
GREEN IS GOLD

There may not be a bridge in Brooklyn currently available to purchase, but, for would-be owners of a New York landmark, the Statue of Liberty can be had for the low, low price of one million dollars. Sure, it's not a hundred and fifty-one feet tall and doesn't weigh five hundred and sixty thousand pounds. This Lady Liberty (ten feet, twelve hundred pounds) is one of twelve replicas of the plaster scale model that Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi made in 1878, recently cast in bronze with the aid of "3-D metrology." It is on offer by the British dealer Ray Waterhouse, who lugged it to the Hamptons Fine Art Fair earlier this month. Arnold Schwarzenegger owns another of the dozen.

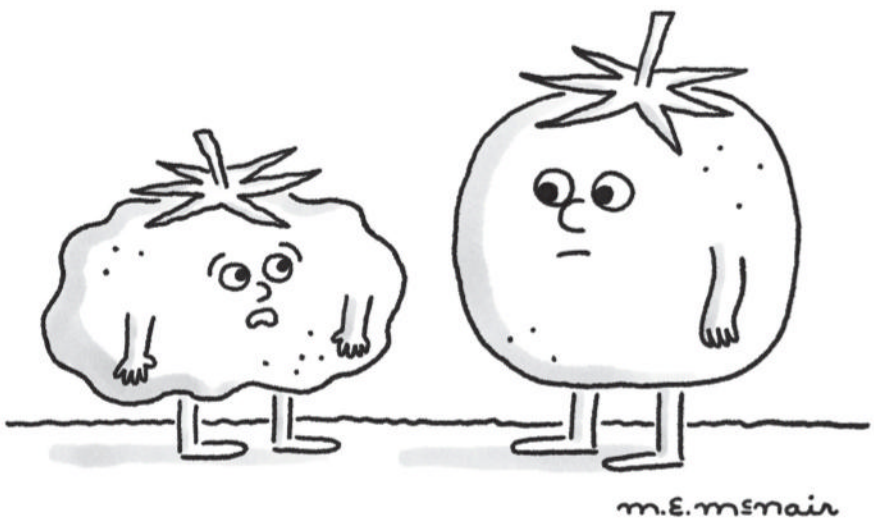
Before the statue braved the Long Island Expressway, though, she stopped in at the Natuzzi Italia furniture showroom on Madison Avenue, for a party. Guests posed next to her with one arm raised, while Rick Friedman, who runs the Hamptons fair, asked Waterhouse what differentiates U.K. and U.S. art collectors.

"Alan Clark, who was a minister under Margaret Thatcher, once said, detrimentally, of another politician, that he had to *buy* his furniture. In other words, he hadn't inherited it," Waterhouse explained. "So there's more of a class system in British minds. It's much more egalitarian here."

Friedman anticipated that there would be interest in the Statue of Liberty out in the Hamptons. "I mean, anyone who walks into your house and sees this says, 'Oh, my God.' So someone wants an 'Oh, my God' piece? This is an 'Oh, my God' piece," he said. "For a lot of these guys, it's not about the money. They have the money."

Two weeks later, at the art fair, the statue stood by the entrance. Inside, other Semiquincentennial-adjacent work was on offer. Grant Rosen, of Artnwordz Fine Art—who came to the art world after a career in theatre (he was the "stunt Beast" in a national tour of "Beauty and the Beast")—talked about a Statue of Liberty-themed painting in his inventory. "It's called 'Land of Opportunity (Son of a Bitch, My Parents Lied),' but we only show that at our international auctions," he said. "It's a gardener and he's watering a money tree that's in front of the Statue of Liberty, and she's holding a solid 18k. gold lamé dollar-sign torch." A print goes for twenty dollars; originals are upward of eight thousand.

The paper that Rosen uses for his art works is repurposed from books deaccessioned by archives like the Library of Congress—"water-damaged, fire-damaged, mold-damaged, rat-damaged, mouse-damaged." What would otherwise be turned to pulp by the Treasury becomes the backdrop for portraits of



"I'm not sure if I'm heirloom or if I'm just shaped weird."

the likes of Paul McCartney (popular in the Hamptons), Queen Elizabeth, and Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Ginsburg hung one of Rosen's portraits of her, wearing a diamond-dusted Brooklyn Dodgers cap and a pearl jabot, in her bedroom. He knows this because she sent him a note on Supreme Court letterhead, which reads, "It is a gem that lifts my spirits and brings smiles whenever I pass it."

Additional patriotic art included a work by an Israeli painter named Gil Goren. Straight on, it depicted an American flag overlaid with the text "O'ER THE LAND OF THE FREE AND THE HOME OF THE BRAVE." From one side, the background became a solid gold square ($38,000). The artist Giancarlo Impiglia exhibited portraits of Washington and Lincoln ("oil and gold leaf on camouflage"). An editioned print by Shepard Fairey of John Lennon flashing a peace sign in front of the Statue of Liberty had sold for forty-three hundred dollars.

But the talk of the fair was a "naked" live model (actually, she wore Stringys invisible underpants and Shibue nipple pasties) draped in a diamond-encrusted sheath of sheer chain mail ($125,000). The garment was the creation of Natalia Fedner, who patented its six-way-stretch technology. "I work with Swarovski crystals usually—imagine the upgrade to diamonds!" she said. Fedner was wearing a slinky copper shawl of her own design which conducts a wearer's body heat. No word on whether it turns green in the rain.

Back at Waterhouse's Modern Fine Art booth, the statue had not sold. "A couple of people have asked whether it would fit in their home, so we obviously gave them measurements and so forth," the gallerist said. "One person's thinking of putting it in their back garden." He mentioned that there was also interest in an Elaine de Kooning painting; it depicted the Knicks beating the Celtics at another garden (Madison Square), in 1981.

A non-art booth at the fair stood out: Lumnen Laser by Avologi, an anti-aging technology "to treat sagging, volume loss, plumpness and more," which a flyer claimed was endorsed by Barry C. Barish, "2017 Nobel prize laureate in physics on the laser interferometer gravitational wave observatory." This didn't seem like something that the Statue of Liberty would need. The cost? $18,750. A sign read "NO Refunds."

—*Emma Allen*

THE SPORTING SCENE

BRAINBALL

There are roughly four thousand neurosurgeons in the United States, and some eight hundred of them were in Central Park, playing softball, the other day. "It's not a good weekend to get a head injury somewhere other than New York," Michael Rosner, the chair of the neurological-surgery department at George Washington University, said between games. Only two or three surgeons from Rosner's department remained on duty. The rest were wearing pin-striped jerseys with nicknames printed on the back: Stinger, Night Hawk, Tex-Lif. For weeks, they'd been training by playing in a D.C. rec league (team name: Ducks on the Pond), capping off fourteen-hour shifts with slow-pitch under the lights. "It's kind of a big deal," Stinger, the second baseman, said. "And by 'kind of,' I mean it's discussed every fucking day."

What began in 2004 as a lark—an intramural softball tournament among the residents and attending neurosurgeons at Columbia, Cornell, N.Y.U., and Mount Sinai—has grown into a national philanthropic tradition that made the cover of the peer-reviewed *Journal of Neurosurgery*. ("The trophy consists of a skull and cervical spine attached to a wooden block, with a gold-painted softball placed in the posterior fossa," the *Journal* reported.) "It very quickly expanded to eight and then twelve, and sixteen—and now it's fifty-six teams this year," Ricardo Komotar, the co-director of the Brain Tumor Institute at the University of Miami, said. He was standing next to his old boss at Columbia, Jeffrey Bruce, and wearing copious amounts of eye black and a cap turned backward. Komotar, the tournament's founder, has a reputation for doing hundreds of push-ups outside the O.R. He begins each day with a cold plunge. He used to play center field for Miami (neuro champs in 2012 and 2016), but now, nearing fifty, he plays first base.

"The old-man position," Bruce said. (He plays it, too.)

"The job of a neurosurgery resident is probably one of the most challenging jobs across all professions, and for seven years it's just grind, grind, grind," Komotar went on. "This gives the residents a forty-eight-hour window to get away from that and see what life is really about." Scores were updated in real time on a dedicated app. Some teams included women. Some, but not all, invited their women to take positions on the field. The games were short—three innings apiece. The hits were often long, despite ample backspin from the pitchers, many wearing brain buckets. At least one participant had not been medically cleared to play, after a stint in the I.C.U. last winter. (He allowed himself a pinch-runner.) A well-built man whose teammates called him Piss, or Pisser, appeared to recount the glories of a grand slam he'd just hit to a friend on FaceTime. ("Ego is part of how surgery gets better," another slugger said.) A civilian on a stroll stopped to ask what the intensity was all about. Brain surgeons: go figure. "Careful with the hands, guys," he said.

"We always joke about people hiring residents based on athletic performance," Komotar said. "I don't know if people actually do it."

"It's too much at stake," Bruce said. "You want to train a brain surgeon just because he can play softball once a year?"

Both of their teams were undefeated after round-robin play, as was George Washington, but no one looked optimistic about dethroning the reigning champions, from the Barrow Neurological Institute, in Phoenix. A headline on the Barrow website reads, "Barrow Uses 'Surgeon-Athlete' Model When Training Neurosurgery Residents."

"We're kind of like the New England Patriots during Spygate or Deflategate," Barrow's chairman, Michael Lawton, said, noting that the team hadn't lost a game since he became manager, in 2017. "People want to beat us." He accused Komotar of stacking the brackets, and recalled the last time they'd faced each other in the championship, in 2022. Final score: Barrow 45, Miami 7. "No mercy," Lawton said. "We absolutely buried him. The guys were just hitting home run after home run." And

that was before Lawton hired a winner of the Tewaaraton Award, lacrosse's Heisman, not to mention an ex-minor leaguer in the Minnesota Twins organization, both of whom stood over six feet in their cleats and were in possession of surgically superfluous shoulders.

The championship this year pitted Barrow against the Mayo Clinic, which blasted heavy metal for inspiration. Of note: Mayo had two brothers, the Ransoms, both surgeons in the same clinic (way to go, Mom and Dad!), and one of them cracked a three-run dinger in the top of the first. But then came Barrow's turn at the plate. "It's like 'When Animals Attack!'" Komotar said, after a string of extra-base hits quickly erased the Mayo lead.

As per tradition, there was to be a party at a hotel downtown that night. "We always come late," Lawton said. "It's a sign of disrespect."

—Ben McGrath

DEEPFAKE DEPT.
BLAME GAME

Sitting on a bench in Central Park on a recent summer day, Fabrice Morvan, the surviving member of Milli Vanilli, was contemplating his future. "It's wide open," he said, gesturing toward a ball field in front of him.

"There's 'Monsters,'" Morvan went on, referring to the recent Netflix drama about the Menendez brothers, which featured the Milli Vanilli hits "Girl You Know It's True" and "Blame It on the Rain." "Thanks to 'Monsters,' those songs, among others, went to the top of the charts again worldwide." The show, he explained, had introduced the music to a younger audience, which was unaware of, or unconcerned by, the thirty-six-year-old lip-synching scandal that plagued the band.

Morvan, who lives in Amsterdam with his Dutch partner, Tessa Van Der Steen, and their four children, is performing in the United States this summer, as part of the "I Love the Nineties" tour. He has not toured the country since the fall of 1990, when it was revealed that he and Rob Pilatus, the other half of the pop duo, were not, in fact, the singers on Milli Vanilli's recordings. The German producer Frank Farian, who masterminded the scheme, had instead used the voices of five session singers—Brad Howell, Charles Shaw, John Davis, and the sisters Jodie and Linda Rocco. Farian had made a Faustian bargain with Rob and Fab, who were young, impoverished Black dancers, from Munich and Paris, respectively: *I will make you famous, if you will maintain the lie.* The lads reluctantly agreed to play along by lip-synching at their live performances. The secret might have been kept (Farian had pulled off a similar stunt in the seventies, with the Euro-disco group Boney M.) if Milli Vanilli hadn't won the Grammy for Best New Artist, in March, 1990. When, in a Pygmalion-esque plot twist, the real singers threatened to go public, Farian admitted the truth, in a press conference in New York. Milli Vanilli's Grammy was revoked.

"We went from being kings to being laughingstocks," Morvan said, crossing his legs on the bench to reveal socks with a "Star Wars" motif, worn with black Vans. His famous long hair was piled on top of his head. For years, the scandal had followed him, "like it was my shadow," he said. "I cut my hair off. Everywhere I went, I didn't know if people were smiling or smirking." He called it "ludicrous" that he and Pilatus were blamed for the deception, while Farian and Arista, the group's label (headed by Clive Davis, who recently died), walked away with millions of dollars.

Arista claimed to have been fooled by Farian, but did the executives know? "They knew everything that was going on," Morvan said.

After Pilatus died, of a drug overdose, in 1998, Morvan said, "I resolved to work on myself and write songs and learn how to play guitar." He also worked on his singing. The day before his visit to the park, he had performed on "Good Day New York" and again on "Good Night New York," and he sounded almost as good as the fake him.

In recent years, the Milli Vanilli story has been retold in no fewer than three feature films: Luke Korem's 2023 documentary, "Milli Vanilli"; Simon Verhoeven's 2024 bio-pic, "Girl You Know It's True," and a new documentary, "Surviving a Scandal," coming to Hulu in January. Morvan tells his version in his forthcoming memoir, "Blame It on the Game"; his narration for the audiobook was nominated for a Grammy. In these revisionist narratives, Rob and Fab are victims of the connivers who concocted the scheme. "They're still making money off my back, because they're using my likeness," Morvan said. He gets nothing from the songs.

Fabrice Morvan

Korem's doc was tested on a focus group of Gen Z-ers, for whom lip-synching is the lingua franca on TikTok. "The response was 'O.K., so what did they do wrong?'" Morvan said. Maybe Rob and Fab were deepfake pioneers? "Trailblazers," he allowed, "in a way."

Morvan was supposed to have performed as Milli Vanilli at Donald Trump's sixteen-day Great American State Fair. (Before Farian died, in 2024, he gave Morvan permission to use the name.) His reasoning, he said, was "There's going to be Vanilli fans there. Let's celebrate the fact that I'm still here and they're still here." Eventually, like many other artists on the bill, Morvan decided to cancel. But earlier, when a flyer for the concert series went out, one of the original session singers issued a statement: "Others using the name 'Milli Vanilli' that appear on the advertisement should be considered a tribute band with no association vocally or musically to our sound or songs."

"How ridiculous," Morvan said, outraged at being dismissed as a counterfeit version of a famously inauthentic group. "They're background singers!"

—John Seabrook

AMERICAN CHRONICLES

PARTING SHOT

Stormy Morse lost two partners to gun suicide. Then the N.R.A. came to collect.

BY MIKE SPIES

Stormy and her son, Myles, battled the gun-rights organization for years.

PHOTOGRAPH BY LOGAN WHITE

Stormy Kay was born in 1961, when her parents were young newlyweds, unprepared and thrust into adulthood. Stormy's mother cut meat at a grocery store and taught classes at a beauty school, and her father was a construction worker. They couldn't afford child care, so Stormy's father took her with him to job sites. "My dad would hide me in the trucks," Stormy told me. She spent a lot of time alone. "I was strange," she said. "I liked rocks. I was very spiritual. I talked to animals. I talked a lot to God." Every Sunday, her entire extended family attended church, and Stormy sang in the choir. Like many men in Frederick County, Maryland, where the family lived, Stormy's father owned guns and went hunting. Her mother had a firearm, too, and occasionally took Stormy target shooting. When Stormy finished high school, she began commuting to a job at an insurance company in Washington, D.C. She started in human resources, then became a legal secretary there. She wore her curly brown hair down to her shoulders, with bangs that framed her blue eyes.

In her early twenties, she met Barry Morse, who was seven years older. He was Italian and Jewish, tall and handsome, clever and enterprising. He had skipped college and now worked for his father, who owned a McDonald's franchise. Morse was married, but the relationship was breaking up. "As soon as I met him, a voice in my head said, 'You will marry him,'" Stormy told me. "The voice of God. I know that sounds weird, but it was instant."

Morse owned dozens of guns, and when he handled money for the family business he carried a firearm, even though he didn't have a permit to do so. On Christmas Eve in 1984, while Morse was still married, he and Stormy smoked a little weed, and then he turned to her and proposed. "Barry said, 'You know, we're really good together,'" Stormy recalled. She agreed and said yes. Morse partied on the weekends and had bipolar disorder, but this did not especially trouble Stormy. A couple of months after they got engaged, Morse was arrested. He was later convicted of cocaine possession, intent to distribute marijuana, and carrying a concealed weapon. He was sentenced to thirty-four months in prison. That spring, while locked up, he finalized his divorce. On June 6, 1985, he and Stormy were married at the Frederick County Adult Detention Center. Morse told a reporter who covered the event for the Frederick *News-Post*, "She'll be waiting for me at the gate when I walk out."

In 1988, Stormy gave birth to a boy the couple named Myles. She stayed at home while Morse tried his hand at different businesses, including owning a video store and producing country music.

Morse frequently had outbursts of rage, and Stormy said that he abused her. One time, he slammed the butt of a pellet rifle on her foot and broke her toe; another time, he threw a glass that hit her in the head. When such episodes were over, Morse would cry, beg for forgiveness, and buy Stormy gold rings and necklaces.

Law enforcement had taken Morse's weapons, and, as a felon, he was prohibited from owning a firearm, but he got Stormy to purchase a .38 Special revolver for him. She was reluctant to get him the gun, but was worried that he'd get in trouble if he tried to buy one himself. Firearms were a part of Morse's identity, a characteristic no different from his love of country music. "He just always wanted a gun," Stormy

said. "He was just one of those guys."

Early one morning, in June, 1991, Stormy was padding around their home in her pajamas. She went into the bathroom, while Myles, almost three, was in the hallway, and Morse was around a corner. He picked up the revolver, and Stormy heard it go off. She ran to him. "I smelled the gun, and saw him physically just hit the ground," she said. Part of Morse's head appeared to be gone. Without thinking, Stormy scooped up Myles and ran to a neighbor's house. "I'm banging on the door," she told me. "And when she opens it, I threw Myles into her hands and said, 'Barry accidentally shot himself.'"

Stormy called an ambulance, then crouched beside Morse. "I said a prayer over his body," she recalled. "I said, 'God have mercy on his soul.' And then, all of a sudden, lights flickered down, and I had this hand on my shoulder. A heavy voice said, 'He's with me.'" The paramedics arrived, and Stormy watched her husband get zipped into a body bag. At that moment, a repossession agent showed up. He told her that he was looking for Morse, who, unbeknownst to Stormy, was in debt. The paramedics were in the process of moving the body, so she told the man, "He's coming down the steps."

The repo man took the family car, leaving Stormy and Myles stranded. She called her mother, who drove over and retrieved them. Stormy felt that God had signalled that Morse's soul was safe, and that she and her son would find a way forward.

According to a federal-data analysis by Cassandra Crifasi, an epidemiologist at Johns Hopkins University, 30,810 Americans died by suicide in 1991; sixty per cent of those incidents involved a firearm. Eighty per cent of those who shot themselves were white men, which is not surprising, since white men accounted for about two-thirds of gun owners in the United States.

A year later, *The New England Journal of Medicine* published a study that linked the ready availability of firearms to an increased risk of suicide. The finding came at a sensitive moment for the National Rifle Association, the country's leading gun-rights group. Violent crime, often involving guns, was surging across the country. Gang-related shootings seemed ubiquitous, and there were also sporadic mass shootings, including a notorious 1989 incident in Stockton, California, in which a man carrying an assault rifle opened fire at an elementary-school playground, killing five children. Democratic lawmakers were in the process of passing bills that would establish a background-check system and an assault-weapons ban, and the N.R.A.'s membership had dropped from more than three million, in the mid-eighties, to less than 2.5 million.

Surveys of civilian gun owners showed that they mostly kept weapons for hunting; firearms were tools of leisure and sustenance. To grow, the N.R.A. needed to position the weapon more as a symbol of cultural defiance. Its messaging increasingly played up notions that the government was tyrannical, seeking to disarm law-abiding Americans and willing to kill those who refused to comply. The N.R.A. found common cause with anti-government conspiracy theorists at Ruby Ridge and religious extremists at Waco, and referred to law-enforcement officials as "jack-booted government thugs." It mounted a campaign to restrict the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which funded *The New England Journal's* suicide study, from underwriting gun research. The N.R.A.'s research coördinator asserted, "Worldwide, nationwide, regionally there is no relationship between gun availability and suicide rates."

These public debates didn't register with Stormy, even after Morse's death was ruled a suicide. She and Myles had moved in with her parents. She gave her full attention to her son, who was in distress. He wasn't interested in interacting with other kids, and he rarely spoke. When his grandfather gave him watercolors, he used the brush on his face, coloring it red, as if re-creating the last image of his father.

Stormy thought Myles was too young for therapy, so she looked for hobbies that might help him engage with the world. When Myles was about five, she noticed that he loved riding on her father's A.T.V., so she enrolled him in a racing program for children, in which he rode a four-wheeler around a dirt track. "Motorsport opened me back up," Myles told me recently. "Racing became therapy for me."

By the time Myles was six, he was at the track so often that his four-wheeler began to break down. The vehicle required a special bearing, and the only place to buy it nearby was a machine-parts shop called Applied Industrial Technologies. When Stormy and Myles went there, a man named Lewis Tabler helped them. He was in his late thirties, short and wide, with an olive complexion, a neat beard, and a receding hairline. Tabler spent two hours searching for the bearing, and Stormy was impressed by his patience. Tabler ended up ordering the part, and when Stormy's father came to pick it up Tabler asked for permission to call his daughter.

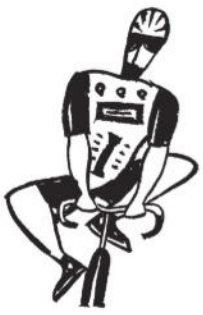
Tabler seemed responsible and kind, but also tough and fun. He had a number of tattoos: a cobra, a burning phoenix, a snake wrapped around a sword, and, on his backside, the Rolling Stones' tongue-and-lips logo. Tabler was a Republican and a member of the N.R.A. who owned multiple guns, but he rarely discussed politics. Hunting was his passion, and he gave Stormy the impression that his firearms were merely a means to that end, just as they had been for the men in her family. Still, after Morse, she had concerns. "I did question Lew about his guns," Stormy recalled. "But he kept telling me he was safe."

Tabler told Stormy that he had left home at eighteen and never returned, and he avoided talking about his family. All Stormy knew was that his father's heart had failed early, and Tabler had developed heart disease, too.

Tabler, Stormy, and Myles became a family. Stormy had a Yorkshire terrier Tabler called Toad, and the dog became his close companion. He took Stormy and Myles to restaurants, movies, concerts, and the Smithsonian. He went to Myles's races and bonded with him over Nascar and baseball. For a while, Tabler coached third base for Myles's Little League team. He also took him fishing and target shooting. "He was essentially my father," Myles recalled.

Earlier in Tabler and Stormy's relationship, Tabler had told her that he'd been married once before, but that the

relationship ended when his wife ran off with his best friend. Tabler wrote Stormy a letter laying bare his feelings and insecurities. "When I first met you I knew you were the one very special woman that I could want, love, respect and desire for the rest of my life," he wrote. "I'm not sure how I knew it but it was as clear as your blue eyes. You have changed me, changed my entire outlook on life. I am totally committed to you and everything I do and say and the way I am with you is due to the love I feel for you." Tabler went on, "I want you to be my wife one day. I think we have something very special that can last forever but I need to know I'm the only man you want or it will never work."



The couple discussed marriage, but Stormy wanted to keep the last name Morse, to match her son. Then Tabler informed her that they didn't have to get married at all, because if they stayed together they would be considered married in the eyes of the law. "He said, 'I'll take care of you, you take care of me, and I'll leave you everything,'" Stormy told me. A marriage license, he told her, was "just a piece of paper." She didn't know that a couple can't enter into a common-law marriage in the state of Maryland.

In 1997, Stormy used funds she'd received from Morse's life insurance to place a down payment on a home in Hagerstown, a rural part of Maryland. Tabler, Stormy said, did not have any savings to contribute, but that was fine by her. Something good should come from Morse's death, and the house was quaint, with a large domed skylight and a wooden footbridge that led to the front door.

Stormy and Tabler both signed the mortgage documents, and then, on the same day, signed an agreement they'd drawn up together. It contained twelve vows, including "I know I need to change some, but it must be my decision to change"; "I don't want to be bossed around, I'll try not to boss you, either"; and "I will try to be as honest with you as I can and be the kind of person you can count on." The last vow read, "When I open up and tell you about my feelings, sometimes it will be like handing you a little baby bird—please hold and handle with care."

The couple agreed that Tabler would earn their living while Stormy handled what she called "the woman stuff." She cooked, cleaned, did laundry, and maintained their two acres of property. Tabler also needed help managing his heart condition, and required near-constant reassurance that Stormy was devoted to him. This insecurity, which Stormy attributed to his first marriage, soon became possessiveness, and her relationships with her family and friends gradually withered.

Tabler also became critical of Myles, whose presence seemed to irk him. Myles was skinny and, like his dad, had a prominent nose and dark features. As a teen-ager, he learned to skateboard and play the guitar. He sometimes got into trouble at school, but generally kept to himself. Tabler picked fights with him about chores. He was "just physically aggressive and in your face," Myles said. "Trying to start an argument." When Stormy wasn't around and things escalated, Myles said, Tabler would hit him, either with a belt or with his fists.

In Stormy's opinion, men were inherently violent. Once, when she and Tabler got into an argument, he shoved her. Myles, who was fifteen or sixteen, came to her defense. Stormy decided to let them fight. "I figured they just needed to get it over with," she said. And, after surviving one traumatic relationship, Stormy said, she was trying to avoid more upheaval. Besides, she loved Tabler, and believed that he loved her, too. But the rift between him and Myles widened. After Myles graduated high school, in 2006, he moved out. He stayed with his grandparents and worked at Quiznos, and then at a movie theatre. Eventually, he got into car detailing.

Tabler's clogged arteries kept death on his mind. He took numerous daily medications and was in and out of the Johns Hopkins Hospital, in Baltimore, where doctors inserted multiple stents. Before every surgery, he shaved his forearms in preparation for I.V.s, and then drove to Applied Industrial, where a colleague would take him to the hospital, about an hour away. He didn't want Stormy to drive him; it made him anxious.

In 2007, Tabler made Stormy the sole beneficiary of his life-insurance policy and his retirement account. He named her the executor of his estate, and, in his will, he said that he wanted to be cremated. A portion of his ashes, he wrote, should be scattered in the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge, a nature preserve on Maryland's Eastern Shore that is a destination for hunters. The rest would stay with Stormy.

The next year, Barack Obama ran for President, signalling the potential end of a government that, under George W. Bush, had been friendly to the N.R.A. During Bush's two terms, Republicans in Congress had allowed the federal assault-weapons ban to lapse, and passed a bill that shielded the gun industry from many liability lawsuits. In almost every way, Obama appeared to be Bush's opposite. He represented progressivism and multiculturalism, and he didn't appear to understand gun culture. Gun manufacturers and the N.R.A. jointly launched a membership campaign called "Prepare for the Storm in 2008."

Tabler was an avid reader of the N.R.A.'s publications, and took the organization's assertions as gospel. The group began feeding its audience an endless supply of outrage. It spent fifteen million dollars to blanket the country with television, print, and radio ads declaring that Obama "would be the most anti-gun President in American history." In flyers and mailers, and on a website called GunBanObama.com, the N.R.A. described Obama's "10 Point Plan to 'Change' the Second Amendment." The claims, which were false, included allegations that he intended to "ban the manufacture, sale and possession of handguns," and the "use of firearms for home self-defense."

To many conservative, working-class white men, Obama's ascendance was a sign that the social hierarchy had been reordered and that the future did not include them. The N.R.A. tapped into this

sentiment. On the campaign trail, Obama had talked about how blue-collar men had been uniquely harmed by a convergence of economic and social changes, leading to a loss of status and of sense of self. As a result, Obama said, "they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them." Though it was intended as an expression of sympathy, the language was coarse, and the N.R.A. exploited it. One prominent ad featured a hunter who said, "Because I believe in traditional American values, go to church, exercise my right to own a firearm, Barack Obama says I'm bitter. Well, I'm not bitter, I'm blessed." The N.R.A. printed yard signs and T-shirts that read "I'm a 'bitter' gun owner and I vote." Another ad included another hunter who asked, of Obama, "Where is this guy from?," a nod to the conspiracy theory that Obama had been born in Africa.

The N.R.A.'s campaign successfully rejuvenated the gun-rights movement, framing it as a fight against cultural erasure. Obama's election led to a historic surge in firearm sales, and Tabler saw himself as part of this movement—a kind of resistance soldier. His response to the messaging seemed quick and stark. "Like the flip of a switch," Myles said. He began referring to Democrats as fascists and Obama as a "common nigger." He fretted about the prospect of the government confiscating his guns. Tabler told Stormy, "If they come for mine, I'm shooting out of the window." He added, "You'll be reloading for me."

Tabler also talked about hiding in the woods of Camp David, the Presidential retreat, which was nearby; he could use one of his rifles to assassinate Obama. Killing the President, Tabler told the family, would make him an "American hero." Myles said, "I saw him become unhinged."

Tabler increasingly loathed his job. "I'd feel bad every morning," Stormy said. "He would go out and say, 'I'm going to a fucking job I don't even like, doing stuff I don't fucking even want to do.'" He banned Stormy's family, including Myles, from the house. She had one good friend, whom she would sometimes visit while Tabler was at work. They hung out and smoked pot, which provided a respite from the tension. "It came down to—he wanted me home all of the time," Stormy said. "He wanted me all to himself."

Myles bounced around various jobs and homes, and by 2010 he was living out of his car. One night, he didn't have a safe place to park, and Stormy said he could come over. But, when he pulled into the driveway, Tabler came to the front door and screamed, "You need to leave now!" He raised a handgun and fired in Myles's direction, hitting some rocks. Myles fled. Tabler told Stormy that he'd shot a plastic round, not a real bullet, but she felt he was using his guns as a means of control, and she was overwhelmed with thoughts that he would one day kill Myles.

Toad, the dog, had died, and Tabler had replaced him with two new Yorkshire terriers. He spoiled them with treats, but kept an inventory of all the food in the house to make sure that Stormy wasn't secretly feeding Myles. Stormy worried that Myles would wind up on the street, so to pay for his car insurance she sold the gold jewelry that Morse had bought her.

In 2011, Tabler began carrying a concealed handgun, though he didn't have a permit. On several occasions, when he and Stormy were in the car together, he grew enraged and flashed the weapon at other drivers. He weighed more than two hundred and fifty pounds, and

"Let's cut to the chase. Are there any lions in the building?"

"Ma'am, this is a landscape."

• •

drank whiskey to ease his insomnia. His heart was packed with stents and a pacemaker. Surgical scars ran down his chest and inner thighs.

Stormy remembered that sometimes, at night, Tabler would wake in a panic, grab a firearm, run to the front door, and check for intruders. He was scared to be alone in the house, and started tracking the odometer of Stormy's car. One of his guns, a silver Taurus Judge revolver, had a laser sight. At home, he often held the loaded weapon and pointed the red dot at Stormy. "Because of Barry, I was used to having a gun in my face," she said. "So I always told him, 'If you accidentally shoot me, you'll have to report it to 911.'"

Around this time, Tabler learned that he could leave his life savings to the N.R.A., through its planned-giving program. The N.R.A. was by then among the most significant advocacy organizations in the country, generating hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue a year. The group made constant appeals to its members for contributions, and it lured big donations by offering photographs in a vanity magazine, commemorative jewelry, and gold blazers.

On August 1, 2011, without alerting Stormy, Tabler called the N.R.A. and left a message. Pierce Shields, an assistant director of planned giving, got back to him that afternoon, and later recounted the conversation in a signed affidavit. "Lew informed me that; he had heart disease since 1988," Shields wrote. "That he hated liberals, that his girlfriend was the current beneficiary of his 401k, that it was valued around 462k, that his 'yorkies' were his children, that he sold industrial equipment, that he did not want his girlfriend 'to receive a dime of his retirement plan,' and that she was 'a crazy bitch.'" Shields went on, "He said that he loved freedom and what the N.R.A. stood for and there was no better place for him to leave his money."

The next day, Tabler e-mailed Shields his latest retirement statement. He wrote that he "wanted to get this ball rolling," adding, "I would hate to check out without having fulfilled this pledge. There is no organization that reflects my own personal views on freedom or that I feel is more deserving of my hard earned money than the N.R.A."

The two men continued to correspond over the next few weeks, and on August 26th Tabler made the beneficiary change official. On a form that inquired about "spousal consent and acknowledgment," Tabler wrote, "N/A." When asked to describe his relationship to the gun-rights group, he said, "Friend of all Americans that care about the U.S. Constitution." Tabler e-mailed the form to his employer, and then gave permission to the N.R.A. to put his name on display at the group's headquarters.

On the afternoon of August 31st, Shields and his boss, Tim Fisher, the N.R.A.'s director of planned giving, ate lunch with Tabler at a seafood restaurant in Frederick. "Lew told me how his girlfriend 'Stormy' was a 'low-life' and that her first husband committed suicide," Shields recalled of their meeting in his affidavit. "He said that he would kick her out but she would end up on the street. He also joked that if something ever happened to him she was probably involved." Fisher added, in an affidavit of his own, that during lunch Tabler was "adamant about who he did not want to benefit from his 401-K and that of course was Stormy." He wrote that Tabler "expressed his dismay that Stormy did not work outside the home and did not contribute financially."

Fisher later sent Tabler a handwritten note. "I want to thank you again for your passion for freedom and for the very significant gift you have made as evidence of that passion," Fisher wrote. He informed Tabler that a gold "Benefactor ring" symbolizing his generosity was arriving soon.

Tabler checked in with Applied Industrial to make sure that the company had registered the change. "I've been in the hospital for my heart twice in the last two months," he e-mailed. "My spirit will never rest if my girlfriend and her bumb [sic] son end up with all that money I've been saving for 30 years."

Myles now had a place to live and a steady job working on cars. But he felt a sense of family was still missing. A friend gave him a vinyl copy of Jimi Hendrix's "Rainbow

Bridge," and, on December 23, 2011, he bought a six-pack, drove to his mother's house, and presented both the beer and the album as gifts to Tabler. "He invited me to stay," Myles recalled. "We split the six-pack and fully listened to both sides of the album before I left that night. We actually had a good time together."

It turned out to be an anomaly. The day after Christmas, Myles abruptly left work because his stomach was troubling him. He had to use the bathroom, and didn't think he could wait until he got home. His mother's house was on the way, so he called and asked if he could stop by. She said yes, but, while Myles was on the toilet, he heard Tabler screaming that he was unwelcome and an "intruder in his home." Before Myles could pull up his pants, Tabler kicked in the door and pointed his revolver at him. "I'll fucking shoot you, boy," Tabler said, according to a police report.

Myles lunged at Tabler, and the two wrestled. The report said, "Myles grabbed Tabler's gun hand, and pointed it towards the ceiling, and Tabler told him to let go because the gun might discharge." Stormy intervened and managed to take the gun away. At some point, Tabler had dialled 911, but then hung up before speaking to an operator. The police showed up at the house, where an officer interviewed everyone and concluded, "I did not see any reason for Tabler to resort to the threat of deadly force." The revolver had been fully loaded, and Tabler was charged with first-degree assault, second-degree assault, and reckless endangerment.

Soon after the incident, Stormy recalled, Tabler met with his attorney, who told him that he was going to lose his guns because of the case. When Tabler got home, he was sullen and quiet.

But Tabler had a small consolation prize: he'd received his N.R.A. ring, and appeared delighted to wear it in front of Stormy. The jewelry represented a secret that would enable him to control her even after he died. On New Year's Eve, Stormy went with Tabler to the home of a hunting friend. In handwritten notes from around that time, Stormy wrote that Tabler didn't drink that night and that they had fun. It was "the last time we had sex!!" she recalled.

Early on the morning of January 10th, while it was still dark, Tabler, who was then fifty-six, told Stormy that his heart was bothering him. He planned to go into the office, he said, and then, following his custom, drive with a colleague to Johns Hopkins for surgery. Tabler shaved his forearms and dressed in bluejeans and a camouflage fleece jacket, but did not wear his N.R.A. ring. As he walked out the door, he was holding his twelve-gauge pump-action shotgun in a case. Tabler told Stormy that he was lending it to a friend. He hugged and kissed her. They both said, "I love you," and then Stormy added, "Don't worry about your surgery. I'll be there." She heard him drive off in his company-issued white Chevy pickup.

Around forty-five minutes later, Tabler drove into the empty Applied Industrial lot and parked behind the loading dock. He unlatched the tailgate of his truck. In one hand, he held the shotgun. In the other, he held a stick with a "V" shape carved into one end. He positioned the gun's butt against the open tailgate and the muzzle against his chest. Then Tabler pushed the stick against the trigger, sending a round of bird shot through his heart.

Soon afterward, a colleague arrived and found Tabler lying beside a dumpster. Blood trickled out of the corners of his mouth and covered his clothes. The colleague touched Tabler's hand, which he later described as "ice cold."

Stormy was still at home. As the morning wore on, she had called Tabler to check in, but he hadn't picked up. She tried him many more times and became concerned. A friend of hers worked across the street from Applied Industrial, and Stormy asked her to check on him. "She kept saying to me, 'There's police over there. Somebody's dead behind a trash can. All I can see is sneakers,'" Stormy recalled. She knew it was Tabler, and, when the authorities finally notified her, Stormy's first thought was "You motherfucker you. How did you hug me when you walked out the door knowing what you were about to do?"

When a person enters a state of suffering and has thoughts of self-harm, they tend to reach for what is readily available. A firearm requires little effort to use and is almost certain to result in a fatality, which helps explain why gun suicide has accounted for a majority of suicide deaths in the United States every year since at least 1968. When Morse shot himself, in 1991, gun fatalities in America were more or less evenly split between suicide and homicide. In 2012, when Tabler shot himself, there were 20,666 gun suicides in the U.S., or sixty-two per cent of all gun deaths. This ratio remains stable, and the victims of these suicides have hardly changed, either: nearly eighty per cent of them are white men.

The N.R.A. has never released demographic information about its members, but research continues to show that white men are, by a wide margin, the Americans most likely to own firearms. Until recently, after the organization was beset by corruption scandals, it was the center of the Second Amendment movement and guided the behavior of millions of followers. Since 2013, it has lost at least two employees, both white men, to gun suicide. A third died the same way in 2020, soon after the N.R.A. fired him. Three years later, an article published in one of the organization's magazines declared, "It is simply not proven that gun control will significantly reduce suicide rates." Acknowledging otherwise would mean recognizing that a public-health crisis has been unfolding among the gun industry's top customers.

On January 11th, the day after Tabler's suicide, Stormy contacted Applied Industrial. There was a little more than two thousand dollars in Tabler's checking account, and Stormy needed money to live on, to pay the mortgage, medical debts, and credit-card bills. When she reached someone at the company, she learned that she would receive about forty-one thousand dollars

in life-insurance money, but that the nearly half a million dollars in Tabler's retirement account would go to the N.R.A. The irony that Tabler had died by gun suicide only deepened her devastation. "I just bawled," Stormy said.

Still, she assumed that, given the circumstances, the N.R.A. would refuse the money. She sent a handwritten fax to Applied Industrial, informing the company that she was contesting the beneficiary change. In the meantime, Myles moved home to be with his mom, and they began to sell everything of value.

In early March, Fisher, the N.R.A.'s planned-giving director, learned that Tabler had died. He e-mailed Applied Industrial, pointing out that Tabler had been dead for two months, and that "accounts with properly designated beneficiaries" are "generally available for distribution within 7-10 business days." He went on, "We want to do whatever is needed to make this a smooth process."

Meanwhile, multiple debt collectors had filed claims against Tabler's estate, and the register of wills informed Stormy that she also owed an inheritance tax, since she was now the sole owner of the home.

As a favor, a neighbor of Stormy's who was a lawyer spoke to the N.R.A.'s assistant general counsel, Sarah Gervase, on her behalf. The neighbor raised the possibility that the organization might give up some of the money, according to Gervase, who recounted the exchange in an e-mail with Applied Industrial in early June. Gervase wrote that she "informed" Stormy's neighbor that the "NRA is not willing to settle this." Tabler's cause of death did not seem to have any bearing on the organization's position.

Stormy started cold-calling lawyers in the hope of finding anyone to fight one of the most powerful political organizations in the country. Everyone she called turned her down, until she happened on Paul Jorgensen, an attorney who had moved to Maryland in the nineteen-seventies, after a stint in San Francisco during the height of the counterculture. He wore enormous glasses and worked in a dim, ramshackle office, among stacks of old storage boxes and piles of paper. "The law is bullshit," he told me. "It favors whoever has the most money."

Jorgensen matched the N.R.A.'s tenacity. Recounting the experiences of Stormy and Myles, and compiling records to substantiate their stories, he argued that his client, as Tabler's dutiful partner for some twenty years, was entitled to his savings. The fight dragged on for eighteen months. Stormy's debts grew alongside Tabler's 401(k) account balance, which, by February, 2014, had reached nearly five hundred and forty-five thousand dollars. That month, Stormy signed a settlement with the N.R.A. She felt that it was her only choice; her financial burdens were too large, and she didn't want to lose her home. She received a hundred and five thousand dollars, and the organization took the rest. Her portion didn't last long. She covered the family's debts, and said she paid Jorgensen tens of thousands of dollars.

Stormy was grateful for her attorney's work, but remained consumed by feelings of rage and injustice. "It's a total mindfuck," she told me. "The N.R.A. fucking played Lew. They viewed him as a sucker, filled up his mind with a bunch of bullshit, and scammed him."

(The N.R.A., Sarah Gervase, and Pierce Shields did not respond to requests for comment. Tim Fisher could not be reached. He and Shields no longer work for the organization.)

In 2015, Stormy got her first job since giving birth to Myles, as a cashier at a local gas station. After a disagreement with her boss, she was fired, and took a position at a nursing home. Her responsibilities there, she said, included bathing patients and changing their bedpans. During the pandemic, in 2021, a patient asked her to take some clothes to Goodwill, which was a breach of company policy. Stormy obliged, and again was fired. She then found a job at FedEx, as a package handler. She is now sixty-four and works night and early-morning shifts, from 10:30 P.M. to 9 A.M., six days a week.

Myles still lives with Stormy. For the past eight years, his girlfriend and her daughter, who is going into fifth grade, have lived at the house, too. Myles considers the child his own. He's found a bit of solace in his closeness with her, and in being attentive, patient, and kind. He suffers from intense anxiety, which he manages with medical marijuana.

The adults in the house pool their resources. "We're surviving," Stormy told me, in February. She and Myles sat across from me at their dining-room table. Sunshine poured through the domed skylight. After her night shift, Stormy's eyes were raw and red-rimmed. As she talked about money, she began to cry. "I'm not going to be able to retire," she said. "I'm just catching up. I want to make sure I keep this house."

The roof needs urgent repairs, and the siding needs a fresh coat of paint. The deck was rotting but Stormy couldn't afford to fix it, so she had it torn down. There's also still a hole in the bathroom door, where Tabler had kicked it during his final confrontation with Myles.

Not long ago, Stormy dislocated her shoulder at work, and workers' compensation accidentally overpaid her by three thousand dollars. She didn't realize it, and used the money. Now she has to pay it back. Last year, she had a mild stroke. "You're worried about every day," Stormy said. "Just to make sure that everything's taken care of and bills are paid or what else can fucking happen."

I asked about Tabler's firearms, and Stormy told me that, immediately after his death, she stored them with a friend. She did not want guns in her home. Myles, she said, gets depressed, and "he's only seen men take care of issues by killing themselves." I asked Myles if he thought he would have died by gun suicide if he had access to weapons. "I definitely do," he answered.

Before Tabler died, he composed an e-mail on his work account that he never sent. "I woke up at 2:30 this morning," it read. "Decided not to go to the hospital again. This isn't life." He signed off, "Tell everyone I'm sorry. I couldn't take it any more." The e-mail surfaced during Stormy's fight with the N.R.A. When she was forced to sell the family's valuables for money, one of the items she pawned was Tabler's gold benefactor ring. For her, it symbolized deception and heartlessness. But for Tabler it was proof that he had served the cause of freedom. His ashes are in a box in Stormy's cluttered garage, while Morse's are inside the house. ♦

If you are having thoughts of suicide, call or text 988 or chat at 988Lifeline.org.

EXIT MEMO

BY STERLING HOYTE

Following a comprehensive internal review (conducted mostly in my head, late at night, while you were asleep and breathing very loudly), I have decided to dissolve our relationship, effective immediately. This decision reflects a strategic realignment of my emotional resources and should not be interpreted as a comment on your over-all market value, which, my friends have warned me, remains strong going into Q3.

I want to start by acknowledging that, in the early days, our partnership exceeded expectations. We had momentum—and, yes, even synergy. We had a shared sense that we were "not like other couples," which at the time felt innovative. Meetings were spontaneous. Communication was high bandwidth. For a while, this worked.

However, as our relationship scaled, cracks began to emerge in the infrastructure. Small issues (my hatred of your friends, your disdain for my mother) were initially flagged as low-priority bugs. I assumed they would be resolved in a future update. Instead, they were folded into the core system, where they now power most of my anxiety.

Regarding the question of accountability, I should point out that, on paper, we agreed to a policy of "total honesty," a truly groundbreaking idea that we felt distinguished us from competitors in the field. In practice, this meant that you would share your feelings in lengthy monologues about how I don't listen, while I would nod and wonder when you were going to stop talking.

I should also address the sex, which, according to my earlier statements, was "so hot, babe." This was a claim I made with extreme confidence and absolutely no supporting data. In reality, it followed a familiar pattern: strong early metrics, followed by gradual stagnation, and eventually a quiet dread of the logistical discussion required to initiate it. Our intimate moments occurred the way co-workers agree to grab coffee sometime: earnestly at first, then increasingly as a symbolic gesture to suggest connection without requiring too much engagement.

Several corrective measures were proposed and immediately sabotaged by my own cowardice. I floated phrases like "we should talk more" and "I just want us to be up front," fully aware that, if you ever took me up on this invitation, I would fold instantly and insist everything was fine. You, meanwhile, continued operating in good faith; this only made me more irritated, because it robbed me of the ability to blame you cleanly.

Furthermore, I want to be transparent about scope creep. Somewhere along the way, my role in the relationship expanded from Partner to Emotional Help Desk. I became the point person for your work stress, your existential dread, and your recurring theory that everyone secretly hates you. While I admire your trust in me, this role was never formally negotiated, and I lack the emotional maturity to perform it effectively.

Our visions for the future are no longer aligned. You are seeking clarity, a clean apartment, and a defined road map to a wedding date. I am seeking silence, the return of my keys, and the freedom to emotionally disappear for three to twenty-four business days without triggering a performance review. These are incompatible goals.

By close of business today, I will be reclaiming my personal assets, including my weekends and my decision-making capacity. You may reclaim yours, including the good hoodie and your half of the streaming passwords. Though I'm sure we would both love to hang on to him, I can't seem to find the version of myself who thought love was directly correlated with effort.

There will likely be a short transition period during which I text you a logistical question and accidentally add a flirty emoji (such as 😉, or even 😜), causing unnecessary confusion. Please interpret this as legacy behavior, not a reëngagement strategy.

In closing, I want to say that this relationship mattered—it just no longer works at scale. I appreciate everything we built together, even if the final product was mostly résumé building and soft skills. Thank you for your time, your patience, and your future 2 A.M. "I miss you" texts. They will be most welcome as I move forward through several months of first dates that will ultimately lead me to regret this termination. ♦

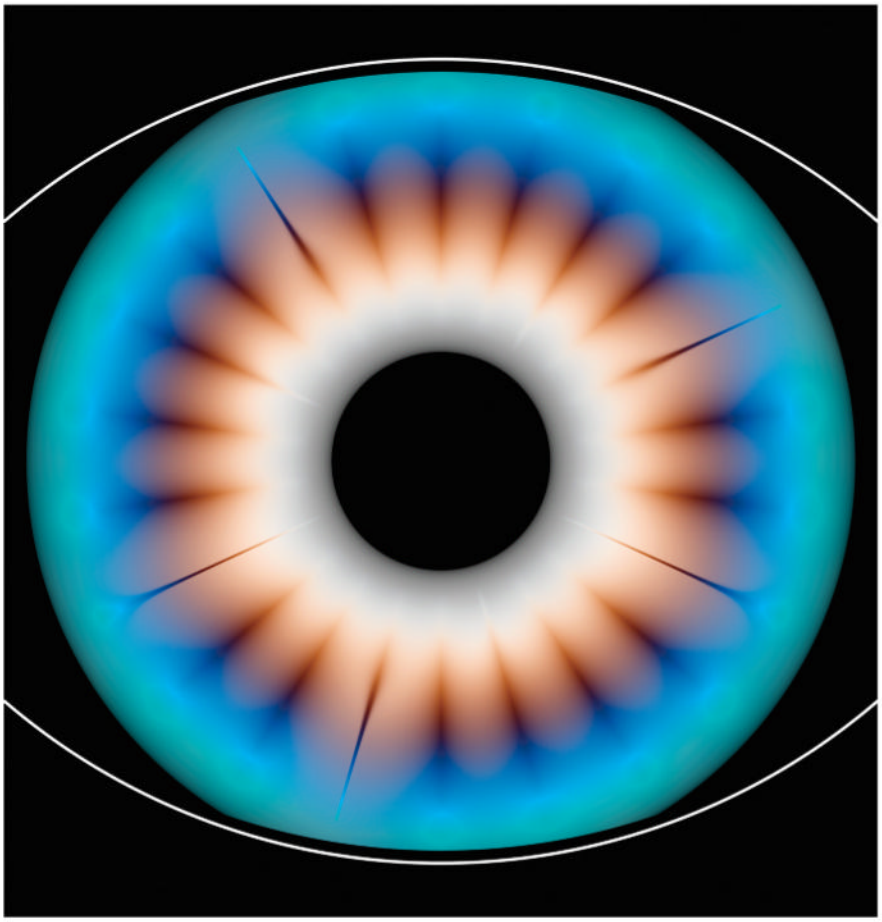
LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

DEPT. OF *SCIENCE*

PICTURE THIS

What would it mean to see a new color?

BY RIVKA GALCHEN



"Olo" can't be captured by a camera; there can never be an olo-colored dye.

During his first year as a professor of computer science at the University of California, Berkeley, Ren Ng was hurriedly putting together a survey course on computer graphics. In the syllabus he had inherited, a full week had been devoted to the subject of color. Ng thought that was a bit much. "I'm, like, Come on. It's R.G.B.," he said, referring to the red, green, and blue subpixels that constitute anything you see on a screen—your cluttered desktop, a Sahara-desert screen saver, the stream of the Netherlands-Japan World Cup game. Ng started gathering slides that would cover the wavelengths of light, the biology of the human eye—the basics—"Blah, blah, blah," he said. A colleague shared a slide that he thought might be useful. It included a minutely detailed photograph of a patch of retina, seen through a microscope, which was attributed to Austin Roorda, a professor of vision science and optometry just across campus. Roorda's lab had helped develop technology that could map the layout of individual cone cells—those primarily responsible for perceiving color—and that, furthermore, could target a single cone cell with light. Eyes are constantly moving; cone cells are extremely small; how color is translated from the millions of cone cells to the mind remains pretty mysterious; this was awesome work. Roorda's lab was using the new technology to explore eye disease and the mechanics of how we see. Ng had his own notion, though: he wondered if it could be used to see a color that had never been seen before.

To understand what Ng had in mind requires knowing a bit of the blah, blah, blah of color vision. We humans experience three primary colors not because the world is fundamentally composed of three colors but because our retinas typically have three kinds of color-perceiving cone cells. L cone cells respond to the relatively *longer* wavelengths of visible light, M cone cells to the *medium* wavelengths, and S cone cells to the *shorter* ones. In effect, this means that L cells respond most strongly to red light, M to green, and S to blue. But when you look at your hand—or a blade of grass, or a clear blue sky, or a fire truck—it is always some mixture of L, M, and S cone cells that are being stimulated.

Ng's idea was to use the Roorda lab's technology to stimulate an array of cone cells in a manner that would never occur naturally. Ng said, "I e-mailed him, basically, What would happen if you stimulated only the M cells? Would that be like the greenest green, or what?" Roorda did not reply. This was 2016. Ng taught his computer-graphics course, pursued other research, and mostly forgot about his query. A year later, when he taught the course a second time, his curiosity returned, so he reached out to Roorda again. No response. When Ng was teaching the course for a third time, in 2018, he realized that he really was very curious about this question. He composed a lengthy note to Roorda, organized like a research proposal, titled "The Grass Is Greenest in Oz Vision." In it, Ng imagined a future where people wore "Oz Vision eyeglass displays," which would be based on the retinal cone-cell mapping and laser stimulation that Roorda's lab was already doing. The Oz glasses would activate any pattern of retinal cone cells one chose. Ng's hypothesis was that, if retinal cells were stimulated in ways that don't occur naturally, "the set of perceivable colors" would be "significantly larger than the natural gamut of the human eye." He imagined people discussing "the indescribable

ILLUSTRATION BY ZACH LIEBERMAN

green of the grass in Oz," then concluded that, although the Oz display "is science fiction," his note was "a real proposal for joint research." Roorda finally replied, proposing coffee. "I get a lot of e-mails suggesting what I should research," Roorda told me, of the time it took him to respond.

In the children's novel "The Midnight Fox," by Betsy Byars, the main character daydreams about digging in his back yard and coming across a "brand-new color." A friend of mine remembers being captivated by this scene, and trying to picture the color. "I felt like I could conceive of it, but I couldn't *see* it," she said. The eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume considered at length whether a person who had seen every shade of blue except for one would be able to picture that one un-experienced shade; he concluded that the answer was yes. In my youth, I spent an afternoon wondering if I would have been able to imagine the fluorescent yellow of highlighter markers if I'd never seen it.

When I first read about Ng and Roorda's work, I tried to visualize what it would mean for there to be a new color. Where would it go in a color wheel? If you think of color as a property of a specific wavelength of light—which is how I thought of it—then you run into the impossibility of there being a "new" visible wavelength. As humans, we can see wavelengths from roughly 380 nanometres (which looks violet to us) to about 750 nm. (which looks red). Wavelengths shorter than 380 nm., which we'd call ultraviolet, are invisible to us (but not to bees or hummingbirds), as are wavelengths longer than 750 nm., which we refer to as infrared (and which snakes and salmon can perceive). The "greenest green" that Ng had in mind was neither ultraviolet nor infrared. It was not a new wavelength at all. If I wanted to picture this green, or at least try to, I would first have to understand that even the old familiar colors are much more complex than a particular wavelength of light.

I went to visit Julian Kreimer, an artist and art professor at SUNY Purchase who has taught classes on color for the past twenty years. When we were nineteen years old, we took the same drawing course. The teacher, whom we revered, had us work for weeks in black. Inky blacks, charcoal blacks, waxy blacks—but only black. Kreimer had since gone on to other hues. The molding on the front door of his house, overlooking Green-Wood Cemetery, in Brooklyn, is painted in a series of colors, beginning with stripes of bubblegum pink, followed by orangeade, dark navy, vanilla cream, dark chocolate, lime, and then pink again. The effect is candy-shop colorful. The door's background hue, which Kreimer said was battleship gray, looked violet to me. When he painted the door, he was "thinking about how neutrals make a small amount of saturated color appear more colorful." He added, "I wanted to judo color—get the maximum chromatic effect with the least color."

I followed Kreimer up narrow stairs to his studio, where he walked me through some of his favorite books and lectures, focussing on those that would illuminate the idea of a green of unprecedented greenness. "There's hue, value, and saturation," he said—the three dimensions of color as they are generally thought of today. Hue is color, as in orange, yellow, red, etc. Value is how much white or black is present. Saturation is often described as brightness. The first color wheel, developed by Isaac Newton, in 1666, is a circle comprising seven wedges, each a hue of the rainbow as he (somewhat mystically) divided it: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. There is no pink, because pink is a red of another *value*. The German Romantic painter Philipp Otto Runge captured an additional dimension of color in his color sphere, which places hues at the equator, with the varying values of those hues becoming lighter or darker in respect to white at one pole and black at the other. The third dimension of color, saturation, is the variable that Ng and Roorda would play with in pursuit of a green of supernatural intensity. Intuitively, we tend to experience saturation as the purity of a color.

Kreimer showed me a painted twelve-square-by-twelve-square grid from the 1961 book "The Art of Color," by Johannes Itten. Kreimer described Itten as a "monkish guy who would shave his head and wear robes at the Bauhaus." Itten's grid proceeds from dark to light vertically, and from violet to red horizontally. Kreimer asked me to point out the colors that appeared most pure. The yellowest yellow was closest to the light end of the grid, and the orangiest orange and the tealest teal were nearer the middle. The bluest blue and the purplest purple were nearest to the grid's dark base. Tracing a line through the "purest" colors forms a skewed bell curve. "So it's weird, right?," Kreimer said. "Why is pure yellow bright and pure blue dark?" Itten was a painter, but, as with many artists, his work on color constituted a scientific inquiry. The curve formed by the distribution of the most saturated colors hints at several characteristics of the human eye. (A bee would disagree on which squares were the purest, as would a hummingbird, a snake, or a salmon.) Because we have many more cones sensitive to the middle wavelengths of a rainbow—which centers on yellow—these wavelengths appear the brightest to our eyes.

Roorda was the first guinea pig in the Oz research project. In a dark lab, he sat in a chair, eyes dilated, with his head position stabilized by a bite bar. His wife and his daughter had sometimes teased him, saying that, though he had spent years studying color vision, he still didn't notice much of a difference between purple and magenta. "I think they just grew up paying a little more attention than I did," he said. So perhaps he would not be a great test subject. Or maybe there would be a technical failure. Or the experiment would succeed in exclusively stimulating M cones, but the brain would not know what to do with input that nothing in evolution had primed it to interpret.

Hannah Doyle, a graduate student who had been key in developing the experimental protocol and the software, was operating what they called the Oz Vision system, monitoring the optical correction and making sure Roorda maintained alignment. "We were using 543-nanometre light, green light," Roorda explained—a wavelength that both L and M cone cells respond to strongly. "While we were getting set up, everything just kind of looked green." Technical challenges dictated that only a

thousand M cone cells would be stimulated, enough to see a patch of color about the size of a thumbnail viewed at arm's length. As soon as the experiment began, the regular green that Roorda was seeing "immediately changed to this deep, more saturated color. Like a deep teal." The experiment had worked. When Roorda pitted that green "against the most saturated natural color you could ever see, which would be a monochromatic wavelength"—in this case, one of around 510 nm., the visible color that best matched the experiment's "greenest green"—"the monochromatic wavelength just looked really pale by comparison," he said. Roorda and Ng's team had their novel color. But it lacked a name. James Fong, another graduate student deeply involved in the project, came up with "olo," after the 0-1-0 coding shorthand for the cone types that the laser targeted: L cones (off), M cones (on), S cones (off).

No printer can print olo, and no camera can photograph it, and there can never be an olo-colored pigment or dye. And yet the study participants—there were four additional researchers, including Ng—did experience a color that you and I have not. This seeming contradiction emerges from the haziness of what we mean by "color." As Isaac Newton noted more than three hundred years ago in "Opticks: or, a Treatise of the Reflections, Refractions, Inflections and Colours of Light," rays of light "to speak properly are not coloured. In them there is nothing else than a certain power and disposition to stir up a sensation of this or that Colour." Kreimer showed me an image of a simple red bird with a pinpoint black eye. After I stared into the eye for a minute, I looked away, and a turquoise bird came into view. "So that also tells us about how our vision works," Kreimer said. The retina's L and M cone cells—the more red-tuned ones—are thought to tire out, in a sense, while staring at the red bird. When one finally looks away, some of these cones remain inhibited, tilting the color balance toward the S cone cells. The turquoise bird is your mind trying to interpret what its cone cells are telling it. Olo is something like that turquoise bird.

"Did she have a parrot? Cases are much easier to solve when there's a parrot."

In a 1794 paper, "Extraordinary Facts relating to the Vision of Colours," the English schoolteacher (and meteorologist and chemist and founder of atomic theory) John Dalton wrote that he had long felt that "several colours were injudiciously named." Pink, for example, was sometimes called red. "I thought it highly improper; it should have been blue," he noted. Pink and blue looked "very nearly allied" to him, and pink and red appeared to have "scarcely any relation." The deep green of a laurel leaf, on the other hand, appeared to Dalton to be a close match to a stick of red sealing wax, and the paler side of the leaf resembled "the lighter red of wafers."

Dalton undertook an investigation into this conundrum. He compared how various items looked to the people around him: grass, woollen cloth, paper "heated almost to ignition." His brother saw the world much as he did, and so did a small number of his students, all of whom were male. Dalton speculated that a blue tint to the vitreous humor of his eye might explain the peculiarities of how he visualized things. When he died, he wanted his doctor to examine his eyes carefully. The doctor dutifully did so. The vitreous humor of Dalton's eyeballs was clear. The Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society then preserved Dalton's eyes and, in 1995, scientists genetically analyzed a sample to confirm what they already suspected from Dalton's written accounts: he lacked the gene for M cone cells. Color blindness for a time was termed Daltonism.

Some seventy years after Dalton's death, Shinobu Ishihara, a Japanese ophthalmologist, was asked to design a test to screen military recruits for color blindness—soldiers must be able to quickly and easily distinguish the contour lines of topographical maps, the reds and greens of signal lights, the colors of flags. Working with a color-blind assistant, he created what are known as Ishihara plates: circles containing variably sized dots in different hues, the contrast of which makes a number or a letter visible to some and

invisible to others. Ishihara plates remain a common test for color blindness and have also become a standard fixture of an art-school education.

Steve Antony, a color-blind artist and children's-book author, recalled that in elementary school he'd had trouble with anything color coded: "Pie charts, flags, geography maps, sports-team colors—I knew I didn't see colors in the same way that most others do." Now, as an adult, he finds the red/green band on the locks of public bathrooms unhelpful, and he hates having to turn the handle to check whether anyone is inside. "But color blindness never really hindered my creativity," he said. In fact, it has given him distinct perceptual powers. He's especially sensitive to value, to contrast, and to patterning, maybe because he has had to follow such cues more closely than a person with typical color vision would. "Pop art was a real discovery for me as a kid," he said. "Then, later, the geometric shapes and bright contrasts of suprematism." Kazimir Malevich's "Eight Red Rectangles" was the inspiration for Antony's children's book "Green Lizards vs. Red Rectangles"—itself an echo of his red-green color blindness. "I always talk about color blindness when I visit classrooms, because people don't know much about it, even though, in most classrooms, at least one of the boys has it," he said. "There's this misperception that what a color-blind person sees is gray—and that's not it."

More than ninety per cent of people with color blindness are male. But not all of them have only two cone types, like John Dalton; the majority have three, but one is atypical in what wavelength of light it responds to best. An atypical M cone cell might be most sensitive to a wavelength of 555 nm., for example, instead of the more standard 530 nm. Color blindness is primarily an X-linked trait—a trait for which women have two copies of a gene and men one—so a mother who has one copy of a gene for a typical M cone cell and another copy for an atypical M cone cell might pass on the atypical gene to her son, who would then see colors differently than most of his peers. But what kind of vision would the mother have? In 1948, the Dutch scientist Hessel de Vries published a study of color-blind men in which he included a brief speculation: there were likely women directly related to them who had all three normal cone-cell types *plus* the atypical one that ran in their family. Would such tetrachromats, as de Vries called them, have an augmented color palette? It wasn't clear. De Vries was in love with Anneke Hogeveen, his lab assistant, and, in 1959, before he could settle the question, he murdered her and killed himself. Inquiry into tetrachromacy remained dormant for many years.

In the nineteen-eighties, Gabriele Jordan, a Ph.D. student in experimental psychology at Cambridge University, was looking into natural variation in normal vision. The majority of people have L cone cells most sensitive to wavelengths of light of about 560 nm., M cone cells sensitive to those of about 530 nm., and S cells sensitive to those of about 430 nm. The "about" was what Jordan was studying. Using an instrument called an anomaloscope—with which a user mixes red and green light to match a standard yellow—Jordan discovered that, even among people with typical trichromatic vision, one person's red is not necessarily the same as another person's. Your S cone cells might be most sensitive to 429-nm. light and mine to 431-nm. Our reds would be siblings but not twins.

During her research, Jordan worked under John Mollon, who had studied the color vision of squirrel monkeys. Like most New World monkeys, squirrel monkeys typically have two cone-cell types, unlike Old World monkeys, who have three. But Mollon and his colleagues demonstrated, through color-matching experiments and then through genetics, that some female squirrel monkeys were trichromatic. He hypothesized that, in the wild, trichromats could lead the foraging efforts for food—perhaps because they would have a more nuanced read on the ripeness of fruit. These studies recalled de Vries's speculation that some human females might be tetrachromats. "It was literally, Well, if it works for monkeys, it might work for humans," Jordan told me.

Tetrachromatic women would be difficult to identify, though. A tetrachromatic person would be even more unlikely than a color-blind one to know that her visual world was anything other than ordinary—it would be different in a way that she had never heard about. But Jordan began testing boys for color blindness at a local school, using both Ishihara plates and the anomaloscope, which detects more subtle color-vision deficiencies. When Jordan found a color-blind student, she would reach out to the boy's mother to ask if she was open to having her color perception tested. One mother, subject cDa29, when asked to use the anomaloscope, was never satisfied that she had made a perfect match to a standard yellow. But when she was asked to discriminate two identical colors from a very similar color—imagine two cobalts and a lapis—she could do so effortlessly, with exceptional accuracy and speed. Subsequent genetic testing showed that cDa29 had genes for four cone-cell types.

"It was a once-in-a-lifetime feeling of true discovery," Jordan said. Ultimately, she found more functional tetrachromats among the mothers of the schoolboys. "I wanted to know, of course, what they had to say about their perceptual worlds," she told me. None of the women had a sense of themselves as having supernormal vision, although cDa29 was a prominent hematologist, working in a profession that requires detecting subtle anomalies in slides of blood smears. At least two others worked in medicine. One was a midwife, who recalled an experience from her training. Meconium, an infant's first feces, usually passes after birth, but sometimes it passes while a baby is still in utero, and that can cause respiratory distress. The tetrachromatic midwife detected meconium in amniotic fluid, "whereas the qualified midwives training her couldn't see anything at all," Jordan told me.

Several of the women said that finding a tiny object on a colorful background—like an earring on a patterned carpet—was a particularly easy task for them, because the object would stick out the way a red apple on a tree might to most people. "Quite a few of them talked about color memory,"

Jordan said. They didn't need to bring a sweater from home when going to buy yarn to match it, or a paint swatch to match a wall.

Roorda and Ng are following up their olo work by using the Oz platform to simulate trichromacy in a dichromatic color-blind subject and tetrachromacy in a trichromatic subject. (Roorda, who is now a faculty member at the University of Waterloo, in Canada, retains an affiliation with Berkeley.) The success of olo suggests a certain amount of neuroplasticity in color vision, in that the mind made sense of unprecedented visual information. Roorda believes, however, that further experiments would be necessary to know that with confidence. "This is sort of why we think this is interesting, scientifically, and why we continue to pursue these experiments," he said. "How do percepts of color develop?" He talked about how newborns cannot perceive shapes or colors well, and how they have trouble recognizing faces. "The optics are fine when they're born, but the brain is not ready to make sense of the input," he said. "My belief is that, although in the early olo experiments I was comfortable describing olo as a teal-like color, if I was exposed to it enough I would probably start saying that the word 'teal' is not doing it for me anymore."

In February, 2015, an amateur photograph of a dress went viral on the internet because people disagreed, strongly, about its color. Some said that it was white with gold, and others that it was blue with black. Like millions of people, I looked at the photo. The dress was white and gold. This was so obvious that I assumed people were pretending it looked blue and black as a psychological prank. I asked my partner and our daughter what color the dress was. They agreed with me that the controversy was nonsense. Without a doubt, the dress was blue and black.

Bevil Conway, a neuroscientist who studies color vision, was grading student lab reports when he received an e-mail from Adam Rogers, a science reporter at *Wired* at the time, asking for his thoughts about the dress controversy. Conway gave the photograph a look. "To me, it appeared periwinkle blue and bronze," he said.

For a few years, Conway had been playing with the hypothesis that, he said, "you have in your brain a 'prior' about lighting conditions." In other words, your brain makes assumptions about whether what you are looking at is lit by warm or cool light. This makes some intuitive sense: your mind wants to understand a red wheelbarrow as red regardless of whether it is viewed in dim light or bright light, at sunset or at noon. So your brain must have some way of "solving" for color constancy. "A whole bunch of pennies dropped," Conway said. He thought that the photo of the dress "might be the little piece of proof I had been waiting for."

He suggested that Rogers ask *Wired's* photo team to run the dress image through its color corrector, first adjusting for warm lighting, then for cool. In effect, this meant telling the photo software whether it should assume there was indoor lighting (warm) or natural sunlight (cool). The dress in the photograph is closely cropped and a bit blurred. It is not clear whether it is indoors or outdoors. "Your brain has to make a choice," Conway said. "If it thinks it's warm lighting, it subtracts orange, which makes the dress look blue and black. If it thinks it's cool lighting, it subtracts blue, which makes the dress look white and gold." The dress was, in fact, blue and black. It was photographed indoors.

I asked Conway, who now heads the Section on Perception, Cognition, and Action, at the National Eye Institute, for his thoughts about olo. He was

impressed by the Roorda lab's ability to stimulate select cones, but he hesitated to call olo a new color; it is a supernaturally saturated version of an extant hue. "I would say you might get olo by staring at a saturated red spot and then looking at a green screen of a very saturated bluish-green," he told me. This would place the afterimage of the red spot over an already maximally green screen, potentially leading to an experience of a supersaturated green. "Color isn't simply what the eye tells the brain," Conway said. "You can't ask if piano music is a key, a hammer, a wire, or the vibrating air. Because it's all those things."

A painter can distinguish cadmium red and cobalt violet solely by the weight of the paint tube, the artist Amy Sillman observed in the opening of her talk "Color as Material," given at the Whitney Museum of American Art, in 2014. There is a Greek word, *pharmakon*, which can mean color, but which also historically meant poison, medicine, charm, intoxicant, and paint. ("Every color class across the country probably shows that lecture—it's great," Kreimer told me, of "Color as Material.") I visited Sillman recently in the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn at her studio, the walls of which were covered in paintings about as tall as a person. Sillman typically applies, scrapes, obscures, re-scrapes, and reapplies paint on her canvases so many times that often the early form of the painting is to the finished work as an ancestor is to a younger incarnation. She is a celebrated colorist, one who came up through the art world at a time when painting had fallen out of favor and color was dismissed, by some, as bourgeois and conventional.

Sillman explained that her Whitney talk was informed by a reading group on color that had met for years. The group read Aristotle (who wrote that color is an intrinsic property of objects), Isaac Newton (that white light comprises all the colors of the rainbow), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (that all the colors combined make black, and that colors have emotional qualities), and Albert Munsell (who, finding the names of colors chaotic and silly, ordered them with numbers and letters corresponding to hue, value, and saturation). They read Frank O'Hara ("Why I Am Not a Painter"), Robert Hass ("The Problem of Describing Color"), Esther Leslie ("Synthetic Worlds: Nature, Art and the Chemical Industry"), and Herman Melville (the "Whiteness of the Whale" chapter from "Moby-Dick"). They read art historians and anthropologists and artists. But the group never agreed on how best to describe what color is. "I realized eventually that there

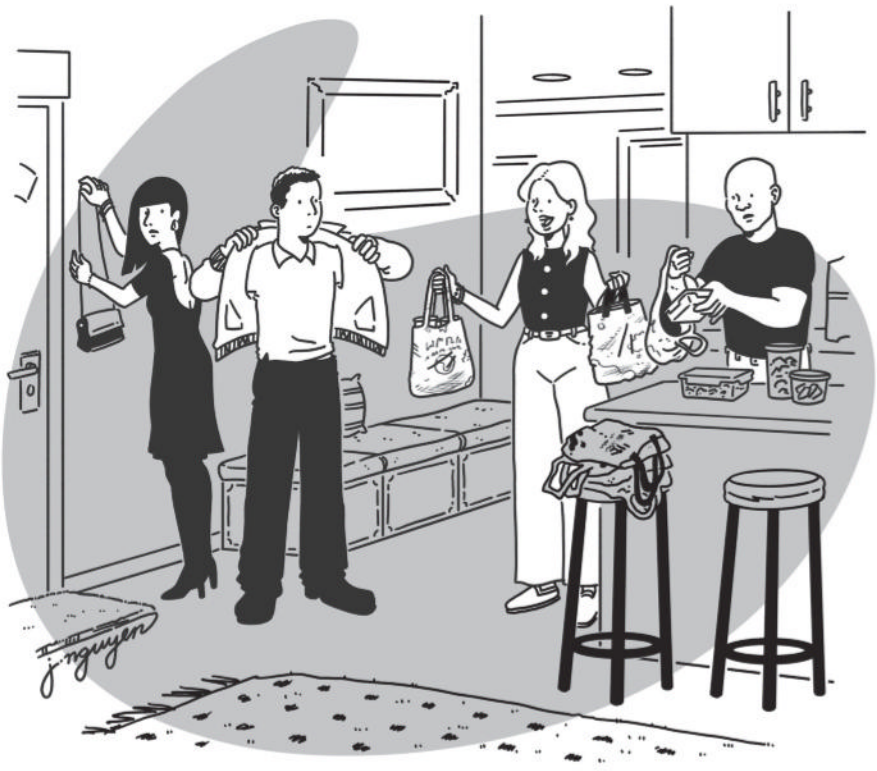
are earth people and there are sky people and that never the twain shall meet," Sillman said. Earth people thought of color as minerals, mud, pigments—as touchable things. Sky people were focussed on light.

Sillman said that she was more earth than sky, but her main conclusion was that "only Josef Albers was right," referring to the Bauhaus artist and pedagogue, who said that understanding color should follow from working with it, not theorizing about it. "The person you should really talk to is my former student Roger Carmona, who runs New York Pigment Co.," she said. "He knows more about color than anyone."

I visited Carmona's shop, inconspicuously situated on a scrubby commercial block in Chelsea; it looked like an enchanted apothecary. Wooden shelves held bags and bottles of colored powder. Samples of minerals (azurite, malachite, selenite) rested near the cash register. Painted rectangles of color hung on the walls, displaying the characteristics of pigments in watercolor paints versus oil versus acrylic. For nineteen years, Carmona had worked for the New York branch of Kremer Pigments, which was founded in the seventies by a chemist from Germany named Georg Kremer. Carmona started out fulfilling orders, then eventually taught make-your-own-paint workshops—it had been an incidental apprenticeship. When Kremer closed up the New York store last year, Carmona, in close consultation with him, opened his own shop, which carries Kremer's pigments. "Georg used to literally knock on people's doors and ask them if he could dig in their back yards" for new pigments, Carmona said. More recently, Georg's son David, who shares his father's dedication, spent two weeks exploring the distinctive rocks of Iceland, where he unearthed three natural-earth pigments, one of which—Snæfellsjökull red, found near the Snæfellsjökull volcano—Carmona now held in his hand.

Carmona began mixing his own paints in college. "Every pigment has a personality," he explained, placing a small vial of dark powder in my palm. "For example, cobalts tend to be bullies"—they obscure what they are painted over, whereas other pigments have more transparency, which he described as shyness. "Cote d'Azur violet has a silky or velvety personality," Carmona said. Studio Pigment violet, a lab-produced color made with dioxazine violet and calcium carbonate, "looks synthetic," he added, indicating a bag that appeared as if it had been filled with crushed candy. "Synthetic pigments refract light differently." What a pigment is suspended in alters the color further. Egg-tempera paint uses egg yolk, casein uses milk proteins, and oil paint uses linseed oil. "The way the particles are suspended in the oil allows more light to pass through the oil film," Carmona said, explaining the distinctive shine of oil paints. "That gives depth, which is what the Renaissance painters realized." Before the Renaissance, egg tempera was dominant. "It has a mother-of-pearl quality."

Carmona seemed only mildly interested in the olo experiment when we spoke, though he later read up on colors invisible to humans, and a recent exhibition at the shop included work proposing a chart of "unseen colors." The day I visited, however, he introduced me to a new color of a different kind—a new pigment—handing me a black-capped clear bottle that held a blue powder. "YInMn blue was discovered at Oregon State University in 2009," he said. It is the first new inorganic blue pigment in two centuries, made of the elements yttrium, indium, manganese, and oxygen. Andrew Smith, a graduate student working in the lab of the materials-science chemist Mas Subramanian, was heating manganese oxide to two thousand degrees, as research into the compound's electrical properties, when an unexpected, luminous, almost phosphorescent blue came out of the furnace. Crayola has since replaced one of its crayons with a YInMn hue, named Bluetiful. "You can see how intensely saturated it is," Carmona observed. It looked to me like an olo of blue. "The refractive index is similar to that of lapis lazuli," he said, referring to the storied pigment that was once found almost exclusively in the high mountains of northeast Afghanistan. YInMn has "the personality of lapis," he went on. "But not the history." ♦



"Please take some leftovers so we can pawn off our worst tote bags on you."

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LETTER FROM ISRAEL

BREAKING RANKS

Netanyahu's strongest challenger is a general shaped by loss.

BY DAVID REMNICK

It's a warm, buggy night in Kfar HaNagid, a coastal village named for Shmuel HaNagid, the eminent poet, scholar, warrior, and statesman of medieval al-Andalus. A mature crowd of several hundred has gathered on the village green. They sit restively in white plastic chairs, awaiting the arrival of Gadi Eisenkot, a retired chief of the Israel Defense Forces who currently appears to have the best chance of unseating Benjamin Netanyahu, the longest-serving Prime Minister in the history of the state. The elections are scheduled for October 27th. Eisenkot is running late.

Israeli pop songs blare over the loudspeakers, and the air is thick with political talk. The sources of alarm seem inexhaustible: the fighting up north in Lebanon; the Trump Administration's turn from frenetic negotiations with the newly emboldened regime in Tehran to a prolonged bombing campaign; Netanyahu's deals of convenience with the ultra-Orthodox, a crucial component of his voting bloc; the deepening hostility toward Israel across the ideological spectrum and all over the world. What is far more rarely discussed, in Kfar HaNagid and elsewhere, is the colossal human suffering and devastation in the Gaza Strip and the mayhem committed daily against Palestinians by settlers in villages throughout the West Bank.

Finally, Eisenkot arrives. He is sixty-six, a man of broad belly and pained expression. When he smiles, he winces as if from a twinge of sciatica. He is dressed in a dark polo shirt, his post-military uniform. Eisenkot's parents were Moroccan immigrants of modest means. He was born in Tiberias and grew up in Eilat, two cities considered to be on the Israeli periphery. Were Eisenkot to win, he would be the first Prime Minister with such a background.

This presents a problem for Netanyahu. Despite growing up in an affluent neighborhood in Jerusalem, and being the Ashkenazi son of a prominent historian of the Spanish Inquisition, Netanyahu has long positioned himself, and his Likud Party, as the security-minded champion of the working class, the pious, the voiceless, and the Mizrahim, who came to Israel from Jewish communities in predominantly Muslim countries. Most analysts here believe that, in a close election, Eisenkot can prevail if he attracts at least some "soft right" voters in provincial cities like Kiryat Shmona, Ofakim, Ashdod, Nahariya, and Dimona. In many traditional Likud strongholds, the journalist Hilo Glazer wrote in *Haaretz*, Eisenkot is described by his supporters as *dialina*, Moroccan Arabic for "one of us."

The crowd applauds lightly as Eisenkot mounts a small makeshift stage. He has spent much of the day in the city of Ashkelon, he explains, where he attended the funeral of a young Army captain named David Hazutt, who was killed in battle "around dawn" in Lebanon.

"I didn't know him personally, but the family asked me to attend," Eisenkot says. His cadence is measured, his tone solemn. "He'd lost his father and was his mother's only son, with one sister. His mother had agreed to sign the consent form allowing him to serve in a combat role, because he had insisted. He volunteered for a combat unit in the Golani Brigade." As everyone at the gathering knows, this was Eisenkot's outfit, too, and a populist signifier in Israel, the "people's brigade."

Over the next hour, Eisenkot delivers his speech and answers questions. Routine stuff. He has neither Netanyahu's practiced eloquence nor his fluency in English, and he has little in common with the firebrands of an earlier era, such as Menachem Begin. He is just short of dull and makes a virtue of it. Last year, he founded a party called Yashar—the name meaning straight, upright, just. At the lectern, he briskly ticks through his themes and campaign promises, among them a pledge to restore Israel as a "Jewish, democratic, progressive, and liberal state." This sort of phrase is rarely heard from Netanyahu, much less from two of his most racist and reactionary ministers: Itamar Ben-Gvir, the minister of national security, and Bezalel Smotrich, the minister of finance. Both are unapologetic in their support for the ethnic cleansing of Gaza and the annexation of the West Bank.

Eisenkot is selling himself as the humble soldier, a political novice untainted by corruption or duplicity. After forty-one years in the Israel Defense Forces, including a stint under Netanyahu as chief of the general staff, the military's highest post, Eisenkot served in the Knesset from 2022 to 2025. During that brief tenure, he says, he discovered that "Israeli democracy is far more fragile than I had imagined."

Since the collapse of the Oslo peace process and the outbreak of the second intifada, a generation ago, popular opinion has moved steadily rightward. By contemporary Israeli standards, Eisenkot can plausibly be described as a small-"d" democrat of the center-left. At the urging of his consultants, and in response to the political realities of post-October 7th Israel, he is tacking further toward the center. He seldom voices reservations about the scale and prosecution of the war in Gaza. He recently called New York's mayor, Zohran Mamdani, antisemitic for asking the federal government to arrest Netanyahu under an International Criminal Court warrant. Eisenkot also avoids the language of a two-state solution, at least as an impending possibility. In June, he told an interviewer for Channel 12's "Meet the Press," "I have never said two states for two peoples, because I understand the depth of this religious-national-social conflict, and anyone who talks about 'peace now' and two

Gadi Eisenkot, a former I.D.F. chief and the son of Moroccan immigrants, is courting disaffected voters on Israel's "soft right."

PHOTOGRAPH BY AMIT ELKAYAM

states doesn't understand the conflict."

As I followed Eisenkot's campaign and spoke with him at length, it became clear that the most adhesive aspect of his appeal had little to do with ideology or policy. If he wins (and that, despite recent surges in the polls, is far from assured, considering Netanyahu's political skills), it will be because he is, in manner and character, the anti-Bibi. What's more, he reflects back to many Israelis something of themselves. Eisenkot is a broken man. He has suffered profound loss. In no small measure, he is a politician whose deepest connection to Israeli voters is his grief.

Shortly after six-thirty in the morning on October 7, 2023, Eisenkot was at home in Herzliya, north of Tel Aviv, when news reports started arriving from southern Israel. Thousands of Hamas militants, led by the élite Nukhba forces, had just broken through the Gaza fence at more than a hundred points. They entered Israel by land on motorcycles and in pickup trucks, by sea in motorboats, and by air on motorized paragliders. With astonishing speed, they infiltrated some twenty kibbutzim and the small city of Sderot. A killing spree began. There were soon reports on radio and television of families locking themselves in their safe rooms, begging by phone for help. For hours, little came.

As Eisenkot absorbed those first reports, he called out to one of his five children, his twenty-five-year-old son, Gal.

"Gal, wake up," he said. "It's war."

"What are you talking about?" Gal said.

"It's war," Eisenkot said again.

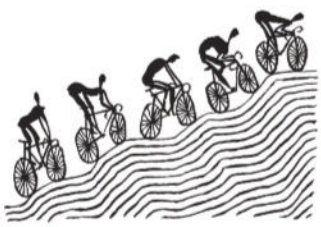
Gal, who was studying bioinformatics at Tel Aviv University, was home for the weekend. "His idea, his dream, was to be either a doctor or a scientist," Eisenkot told me.

He drove Gal to his apartment in Tel Aviv to collect his uniform and gear and then took him to a rendezvous point where he joined his fellow-reservists. Gal had been trained as a combat medic.

Four days later, with a ground invasion of Gaza imminent and an attack on Hezbollah in Lebanon under consideration, Netanyahu asked Eisenkot to become part of a small war cabinet. Eisenkot had served under Netanyahu as chief of the general staff from February, 2015, to January, 2019, but was now a political opponent. Netanyahu hoped to present a united front to a deeply divided public, much of which had come to loathe and distrust him. After months of mass demonstrations against his effort to curtail the power of the judiciary, he urgently needed support for the coming war. Before the Hamas attack, many reservists, including pilots in Air Force units, had threatened to refuse service in protest of the danger they believed Netanyahu posed to Israeli democratic institutions.

"I joined the war cabinet, even though I never in my life thought I would be at the same table with Ben-Gvir and Smotrich," Eisenkot told me. "The first meeting"—on October 11th—"was very dramatic. Bibi called me to sit at a meeting at five in the evening. When I walked into the room, I didn't know what it would be about. This was the first time Bibi realized what it is to lose your balance. It was very strange. At first, I didn't know what we were doing. Then I realized that they had called me in to talk about a targeted killing of Hassan Nasrallah," the leader of Hezbollah. "I didn't know that Netanyahu had just gotten off a call with Biden, and Biden had told him, 'Do not.' There was a presentation, and it was said that the attack would be at 7 P.M. After the chief of the general staff stopped speaking, Netanyahu turned to the war cabinet and said, 'What are your thoughts?'"

Israeli intelligence later obtained documents indicating that Yahya Sinwar,



the leader of Hamas in Gaza, and other Hamas leaders had discussed for several years with Nasrallah and the Iranian regime a multifront "plan of annihilation" against Israel. Sinwar launched the assault without advance warning to his allies, then sent messages to Beirut and Tehran apologizing for taking them by surprise and imploring them to join the fight immediately. Hezbollah's élite Radwan force and its immense arsenal of rockets were positioned in southern Lebanon, near the border, but Nasrallah declined to rush into a war of such consequence. He sanctioned only a limited, symbolic attack in support of Hamas.

In the war cabinet, Eisenkot argued against opening a second front. "I said we had to be focussed on the south," he recalled. "We needed to have stability there. And only after we deal with Hamas in the south should we turn northward." He continued, "The meeting finished at six, and we went to an underground bunker. When I arrived, someone told me that only a brigadier general"—Amit Saar, the head of the Military Intelligence Research Department—"really had his head on straight. Everyone else had lost their minds. The chief of the general staff said, 'We have to finish up this conversation, because I have only twenty minutes before I send the planes into the air.' So I asked that this brigadier general get up and present to the room. Saar said he thought it would be a big mistake. After his presentation, three other people in the cabinet agreed with him." In the end, Eisenkot's argument won out. With the planes in the air, Netanyahu called off the strike.

"We prevented a very wrong decision, because, according to the Washington *Post*, if we were to attack in Lebanon then, we would have realized Sinwar's strategic vision to bring about an immediate regional war," Eisenkot said. "Hamas, which caused us the greatest damage in our history, would have become a secondary front."

The meeting ended around midnight. As Eisenkot left for home, he saw that he had several messages on his phone from Gal.

He called his son back. "Gal, what's going on?" he asked.

Years earlier, when Eisenkot had polled his family about getting into politics, Gal had told him that four decades in the Army was enough service. He should enjoy his life. But now Gal said, "I understand why it's important for you to be involved in politics."

"I was still exhausted from the meeting," Eisenkot told me. "I said, 'I think I just did something very important for the war, and I will tell you about it later.'"

In the weeks that followed, Eisenkot participated in fierce debates over the conduct of the war. He pressed for rapid

agreements to free as many hostages as possible. The hostages were scattered across Gaza, many of them deep in the network of tunnels beneath the Strip. Israeli intelligence didn't see a prospect of rescuing them in large numbers. There would be no Entebbe-style miracle. Eisenkot argued that the only way to bring them home was to make their release the national priority and keep negotiating with Sinwar. Smotrich, Ben-Gvir, and senior military officials put the annihilation of Hamas first, no matter the cost to civilians. As casualties and destruction mounted, Netanyahu invoked an open-ended doctrine that he would soon call "total victory." Intelligence reports indicated that the hostages were being abused, yet Netanyahu and his ministers showed little sympathy for their families, who were pleading for action to free them. Eisenkot, having lost the argument, eventually left the war cabinet. He could no longer act as a "fig leaf," he says, for a Prime Minister whose main concern was to preserve his coalition with Ben-Gvir and Smotrich, and his own political power.

On a Thursday in late November, Gal came home for a break from reserve duty. For nearly a week, a hostage deal had paused the fighting and brought the release of dozens of captives. The pause ended the next morning. That evening, Gal had Shabbat dinner with his parents. Early on Saturday, Eisenkot drove him to Tel Aviv, where he could catch a bus to his assembly point. They rode mostly in silence. Gal had been up until 4:30 A.M. with his friends. When he and his father finally got to Tel Aviv, they hugged and said their see-you-soons.

One morning in the first week of December, Eisenkot visited a base on the Gaza border for a briefing on explosives confiscated in the Strip. At division headquarters, a general abruptly pulled him from the room and said that Gal had been "very badly wounded." Eisenkot should return home immediately. Eisenkot had delivered such messages many times before. "Give me credit," he told the general. He understood that his son was dead.

"At that moment," he recalled, "I switched to autopilot." In a kind of trance, he got in his car and headed north toward Herzliya. As he drove, he called his eldest son, Guy, and said, "Gal has been killed. Go home and make sure no one enters the house until I get there."

• • •

Sometime after three, Eisenkot arrived home. His wife, Hanna, was putting their granddaughter down for a nap. His three daughters were there as well. He told them what he'd learned about what happened. Intelligence officers had discovered that the remains of two fallen Israelis—a soldier named Ziv Dado and a young woman named Eden Zakaria, who had been at the Nova music festival—were being held by Hamas on the outskirts of Jabalia, in the northern Gaza Strip. Gal and another soldier, Eyal Berkowitz, had joined an effort to find and extract the two bodies. During the operation, Gal and "Berko" were killed by an I.E.D. The extraction was successful, but was it worth it? "My wife asked me a lot of difficult questions about the mission," Eisenkot told me. "Was it right to endanger soldiers to retrieve dead hostages? She's asked me that many times."

Thousands of people crowded into the military cemetery in Herzliya for Gal's funeral. Netanyahu and much of Israel's political and security establishment were there. Eisenkot told me that he had not cried in fifty years, but, as he stood before his son's flag-draped coffin and spoke to the assembled, he was at times unable to continue.

"Galush, our beloved," he said, "I promise you that we will continue to be a united and happy family, so that your sacrifice and that of the other fallen will not be in vain and that we will be worthy of it. I salute you, beloved son." Then Eisenkot, wearing dark glasses, his voice cracking, addressed the mourners: "The pain is great. It is huge. But we are a happy, strong family, and, if Gal could tell me one more thing, he would say, 'Choose life—keep being happy.' He lives with us in our hearts. He was like that in life. And he will remain that way for us forever."

Not long afterward, the television journalist Ilana Dayan interviewed Eisenkot on Channel 12 and asked him how he and the family were enduring their loss.

"The mornings and nights became

harder," he said, "but as far as I am concerned, at least, there is no alternative, because I know the alternative is bad for me personally and bad for the family. Before bed, and when I get up, it is with me. But I truly hope that I'll learn to live with it. I must. The alternative is an abyss."

Loss followed loss: two of Eisenkot's nephews were also killed in battle, one in Khan Younis, the other in Beit Lahia. For a long time, Eisenkot was in mourning, drained, deferring all political decisions. Then he left the National Unity party in July, 2025, founded Yashar two months later, and, on June 30, 2026, formally declared his intention of succeeding Netanyahu as Prime Minister.

In the immediate aftermath of the Hamas attack on October 7th, two propositions were treated as nearly axiomatic in Israeli public discourse.

The first was that Netanyahu could not possibly survive as Prime Minister. He had, after all, presided over the worst breakdown of national security in the country's history. Netanyahu, who had fashioned himself as an Israeli Churchill, had concentrated on Iran while waging a distinctly Trumpian culture war against enemies real and imagined: the media, cultural élites, and supposed deep-state antagonists in the courts and the military. He considered Hamas—especially compared with Hezbollah, in Lebanon, or the regime in Tehran—to be a ragtag force, gangsters and fanatics with AK-47s who could be contained through infusions of Qatari cash, sophisticated electronic surveillance, and periodic rounds of limited warfare, a strategy known as "mowing the grass." Within a week of the massacre, polls indicated that Netanyahu, who had offered no gesture of contrition, was almost certain to lose power. His likely successor was Benny Gantz, a former general and leader of the I.D.F. who was so tall, so silver-haired and taciturn, that Donald Trump would surely have regarded him as "straight out of central casting."

Netanyahu faced fury in the streets and within the government. Yair Lapid, who heads Yesh Atid, a center-left opposition party, and who for six months served as Prime Minister, in 2022, recalled for me a speech that he delivered in Netanyahu's presence in the Knesset after the attack. "Mr. Prime Minister, the amazing thing is that you still don't understand," Lapid said, his voice full of contempt. "Nothing will be left of you. There will be no museum in your name, no square. There will not even be a Benjamin Netanyahu Fountain. There will be only one thing: October 7th. . . . Your time is up. Your extremist and reckless government is collapsing. Under your feet, the ground is burning."

Yet Netanyahu continued to prosecute the war, while refusing to acknowledge his role in its origins. Support for Gantz, who lacked both a message and a vivid public presence, ebbed. And so the Prime Minister, despite his diminished standing and Eisenkot's ascendance of late, could well be reëlected this fall. His methods will be familiar to Americans. He survives by sheer demagoguery and by catering to an implacable, MAGA-like base, indulging extremist ministers in their pursuit of annexation and ethnic cleansing, and acceding to ultra-Orthodox demands for exemption from military service and ongoing access to enormous state subsidies.

Netanyahu's opponents believe that this survival strategy has finally become untenable. "Bibi thinks he can keep riding the tiger," Lapid told me. "He thinks he can ride the tiger of Jewish extremism—but it rides him. He thinks he can ride the tiger of religious power—but religious power rides him."

Even so, anxiety runs through the opposition. Ehud Olmert, who served as Prime Minister from 2006 to 2009, told me that many of Netanyahu's opponents fear he might take a page from Trump's book and attempt to discredit the election results. "The police here are not governed normally," Olmert said. Ben-Gvir, as minister of national security, oversees the police. "How will they enforce the elections if Bibi loses?" Olmert went on. "He might try not to recognize the ballot, like his friend Trump did on the sixth of January."

Should Netanyahu prevail, Eisenkot, Olmert, Lapid, and many others I spoke with expect that Israel's isolation will deepen, and that many of its most talented and productive citizens, especially those with second passports, will consider their options. "If Bibi wins the elections, I presume that a hundred thousand people, from twenty-five to forty—high-tech people, academics with kids—will leave the country rapidly," Olmert said.

ANY YOUNGER

Only some of me
is here on Earth.
Like when I close my
coat in the car door—
the rest is outside.
I say this to assure

you that you've harmed
just part of me;
the remainder can't,
from this lapis planet,
be remotely reached.
I say this to teach.

Better luck next time.
Kiss the blue gem
in its bezel setting. And
better hurry. Happy
birthday. Guess
what you're not getting.

—Natalie Shapero

"I think Israel has lost its mind, like the U.S. after 9/11," Assaf Sharon, a professor of philosophy at Tel Aviv University and a pro-democracy activist, told me. "For the first time in my life, I am no longer confident that the country will survive. I always hated this alarmism. But Israel has cornered itself into a position in which there is a tangible threat to the survival of the state."

That fear was recently voiced by a veteran of America's Democratic Party establishment. In early July, Rahm Emanuel, a former top adviser to both Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, came to Tel Aviv University to denounce Netanyahu for leading his country into a disastrous cul-de-sac of "occupation and isolation." He warned that Israel wasn't just losing the Democratic Party; it was in danger of losing the United States. "The pursuit of a so-called Greater Israel is as self-destructive and fanatical as the chant 'from the river to the sea,'" Emanuel said. "Your government has been complicit in the horrors now being inflicted on innocent families in the West Bank. That undermines your international legitimacy as a small nation, at a time when you can least afford it." The medicine was particularly harsh because it came from someone who could hardly be dismissed as a radical or an antisemite. Emanuel's father served in the 1948 War of Independence. His middle name is Israel.

The second premise of those early post-October 7th days was that Netanyahu would be compelled, by conscience and tradition, to establish an official commission of inquiry into the origins of the catastrophic security failure. It would be modelled on the commission chaired by Shimon Agranat, the chief justice of the Israeli Supreme Court, after the surprise invasion by Egypt and Syria on Yom Kippur, in October, 1973. The Agranat Commission identified the missed clues and the ignored warnings, thereby exposing the carelessness of the security establishment. The country had looked into the void. Had Israeli tank forces not rallied after days of terrible losses in the Sinai and the Golan Heights, the Egyptian and Syrian Armies might well have overrun central Israel. The report prompted the resignations of numerous senior security and intelligence officials and helped end Golda Meir's political career.

Netanyahu, however, will never accept responsibility in this way. A succession of senior military and intelligence officials have resigned, issuing statements of profound regret for their failures before and on October 7th. Netanyahu, the head of the government they served, has refused to do the same. He airily observes that Franklin Roosevelt did not resign after Pearl Harbor, and that George W. Bush did not step down after 9/11. They focussed on the wars before them. Netanyahu's non-apologies are exercises in deflection.

Netanyahu has publicly distanced himself from rampant talk of "traitors from within," but he has done little to curb its spread in his political camp and beyond. This cluster of conspiracy theories holds that senior military and intelligence officers deliberately failed to wake him in time to prevent the Hamas invasion. According to a survey conducted by Reichman University, as many as half of those who voted for Netanyahu's coalition in 2022 have come to believe in such deep-state theories. The purveyors of these theories include commentators on the Netanyahu-friendly Channel 14 and Netanyahu's son Yair, a podcaster and social-media bomb-thrower who combines the blood loyalty of Donald Trump, Jr., with the shitposting energy of Laura Loomer. Tally Gotliv, a Likud member of the Knesset, has claimed, falsely, that American intelligence intercepted a telephone call between the partner of Shikma Bressler, a left-leaning protest leader, and Sinwar, the Hamas leader who planned the attack.

"It's much more pervasive than 9/11 conspiracy theories in the U.S., and it's not hard to figure out why," the journalist Amos Harel told me. "It's hard to explain to yourself what happened if you believe that Bibi is God. How did it all collapse so completely? Someone needs to be blamed."

Although Netanyahu has given lip service to the idea that the security failures should be investigated, few Israelis expect him to establish an independent state commission of inquiry. In the absence of one, Harel, a longtime defense analyst for *Haaretz*, has done much of the preliminary work himself. His recent best-seller, "06:29: Anatomy of a Failure," is a four-hundred-page indictment of arrogance, neglect, and institutional complacency. He lacks the subpoena power of an official commission, but his extensive sources in the national-security establishment enabled him to reconstruct how warnings were repeatedly ignored, and how a governing assumption, a *conceptzia*, had taken hold that utterly misread the situation in Gaza.

Harel describes how junior officers, including female ground observers stationed near Gaza, detected signs of a major attack well before the fence was breached, only to have their reports discounted by their superiors. Intelligence officers also noticed that Hamas had activated Israeli SIM cards in the hours before the invasion. But senior officers concluded that Hamas was conducting an exercise or, at most, preparing a limited attack.

Harel also reconstructs consultations among senior military and intelligence officials through the night of the sixth and the seventh, after signs of unusual activity appeared inside Gaza. Ronen Bar, the head of Shin Bet, the nation's internal-security service, and Herzi Halevi, the chief of the general staff, both received late-night calls. The reports were alarming enough that Halevi wrote himself a note: "Let's not convince ourselves that this is nothing." At around 5:49 A.M., Israeli surveillance systems detected men on motorcycles and in jeeps near the security barrier. Still, no effective measures were taken.

"When I read transcripts of what happened before the attack, I feel like banging my head against the wall," Harel told me.

Eisenkot and the other opposition leaders—including Lapid, the center-right former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, and Yair Golan, of the left-leaning Democrats—agree that one of the first acts of a new coalition government should be the establishment of a state commission of inquiry into October 7th. Netanyahu's claim that his intelligence chiefs merely failed to wake him would be unlikely to carry much weight with its investigators.

"In the chain of command, not knowing does not excuse responsibility. Quite

the opposite, it adds to it," Eisenkot said. "The Prime Minister is first in line, he gets his updates from military intelligence and the I.D.F., and he was involved. . . . Therefore, the responsibility was given to him when he took the oath of office on the Bible. He bears a sharp and clear responsibility. You don't have to *take* responsibility. It's there."

Eisenkot's insistence on command responsibility has a conspicuous limit. He remains reluctant to condemn Netanyahu in any detail for the extraordinary severity and duration of the war in Gaza. "When the war began, it caused Israelis for the first time to begin speaking in terms of the Shoah," he said. "People started to say, 'Hamas are Nazis.' There was the conviction that there had been a massacre, rape, horrible things, and this was the knowledge that everyone went into war with. And therefore people like Gal were willing to pay with everything, including with their lives, so that there could continue to be a state. . . . But there is no denying it—after October 7th and the beginning of the war, the Israeli mind-set moved rightward. I stayed in the same place. But I understood that, if Israel didn't strike with a heavy hand at first and show power, then we have no future here."

This was my fifth trip to Israel since October, 2023. When I had last visited, the previous June, Netanyahu and his supporters were arguing that Hamas was being soundly defeated and that Israel had used its military power to remake the region. Without irony, they spoke of a "new Middle East," a phrase that Shimon Peres, a former Prime Minister, had once used to describe a peaceful future in which Israel would at last live in political and economic harmony with its neighbors, including a nascent Palestinian state.

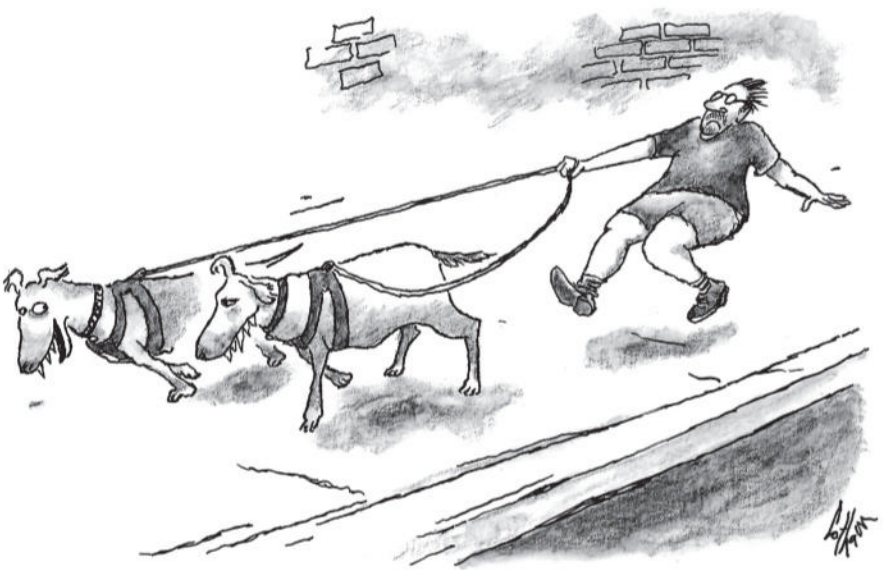
When the two men were political rivals, Netanyahu ridiculed Peres as hopelessly out of touch with the cruel realities of the region. Now, in the summer of 2025, Netanyahu and his camp envisioned a different sort of "new Middle East," one in which Israel had rebounded from catastrophe, shattered Hezbollah, and, with American B-2 bombers dispatched by Trump, destroyed the Iranian nuclear project, which the President declared "obliterated." They predicted a popular uprising in Iran and the imminent collapse of the Islamic theocracy. Stability would surely come to Lebanon and Syria, and the Abraham Accords would expand to include more Sunni nations, among them Saudi Arabia. Michael Oren, who had served as Netanyahu's Ambassador to Washington, told me at the time, "There's a very good chance that you won't be able to understand the twenty-first century without understanding the Twelve-Day War."

Entirely absent from this euphoric, triumphalist, end-of-history vision was any acknowledgment of the deaths of at least seventy thousand Palestinians, including more than twenty thousand children; the complete destruction of the vast majority of housing, schools, and hospitals throughout the Gaza Strip; and the many other acts committed there that constitute war crimes. Nor did it anticipate that Netanyahu and Trump would embark on a reckless new war. By the time I returned, months of Israeli bombardment had killed thousands of people in Lebanon and driven some 1.2 million people from their homes. A year after the Twelve-Day War, Oren allowed, "That was the glass-half-full version of things."

Eisenkot, for his part, regards Netanyahu's declaration of victory in Iran as ludicrous. After watching Netanyahu make the claim one night on Channel 14, he called one of his advisers and said, "Does Bibi really think everyone here is stupid?"

Danny Citrinowicz, who spent twenty-five years in military command positions, including as head of the Iran branch of military intelligence, was sharper still. "Israel, in its wounded rage after October 7th, lost its strategic mind," he told me. The joint Trump-Netanyahu military campaign ended in "an absolute disaster," he said. The bombing on the first day killed the aging Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who was succeeded by his even more hard-line son, Mojtaba, and left the leadership of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps more radicalized and empowered than ever. The hope that bombing might inspire a rapid popular uprising was "preposterous from the start."

In the end, Citrinowicz told me, "we ended up giving even greater legitimacy to the Iranian regime and strengthening them." The Gulf states, which had been drawing closer to Israel and the United States, would now seek an accommodation with Iran. Trump had imagined that he could replicate the ease of the American operation in Venezuela. Instead, he launched an air campaign against a country of more than ninety million people and found himself in a quagmire that was fracturing the MAGA coalition and threatening the global economy. Netanyahu, who had sold the plan to Trump after failing to do so with American Presidents going back to George W. Bush, now faced an



"Could you take over the tugging for a while?"

Iranian leadership with a stronger motive to acquire a nuclear weapon. And U.S. support for Israel had cratered across the political spectrum, a development that most Israelis had yet to grasp fully.

"Most Israelis cannot bear to hear Israeli policy criticized abroad, and so many of them turn around and assume it is antisemitism," Citrinowicz told me. "Antisemitism exists, but you can't be so defensive to think that any and all criticism comes from that place."

Yet most Israelis, despite their generally favorable view of Trump, believe that the American President ended the campaign too soon and failed them. "The bottom line was a lack of American will," Oren insisted.

Amit Segal, a conservative commentator for Channel 12 and *Israel Hayom*, told me that Netanyahu regards renewed conflict with Iran as politically advantageous. "For Trump, ending the war with Iran is a crucial condition for the midterms," Segal told me. "For Netanyahu, ending the war is the obstacle to winning the 2026 election. From a political perspective, this is why there is a divide between them."

When it became clear that Eisenkot would be a leading candidate for Prime Minister, the producers of "Uvda," Channel 12's investigative-news program, made an hour-long documentary about the early stages of his campaign. It was a traditional fly-on-the-wall piece, though, in this case, the fly generally buzzed around Eisenkot's car as he was ferried from one campaign stop to another. He sat in the front passenger seat, displaying a kind of wry detachment from the patter and questions directed at him. Eisenkot does not hesitate to describe himself as fat, and he cheerfully admitted to his fellow-passengers that he had recently lost a few kilos through a combination of diet, exercise, and "the shot."

"All of his rivals may be slicker than him," the narrator intoned early on, but Eisenkot "has a stronger story." The story, of course, was that of the honest military man and the grieving father.

The question posed by the documentary, and daily in the Israeli press, is whether Eisenkot has what it takes to defeat Netanyahu. In a typical scene, Eisenkot visited the Tel Aviv apartment of Ronni and Shelly Zehavi, a prosperous couple who made their money in tech, and met with their equally prosperous friends. As he girded himself for a polite assault from these potential donors, the narrator said that the "elephant in the room" needed to be addressed. The country, Eisenkot allowed, had grown accustomed to a cunning politician "who knows how to deliver a message, talk, and connect." If Netanyahu were to win, one guest warned, "half the kids of the people in this room won't be here in twenty years." They worried that Eisenkot, for all his years in the military, was "too polite." (Israelis do not, in the main, value politesse.) One potential donor told him to "wake up" and "stop fumbling."

At a humbler gathering of predominantly Moroccan Jews, the message was much the same. "The gloves have to come off," one woman told him. "This is the moment."

In another scene, filmed at campaign headquarters, Eisenkot and his advisers were being tutored by Steve Miller, a protégé of the late Arthur Finkelstein, an American political consultant who worked closely with Netanyahu. In the 1996 campaign, Finkelstein supplied Netanyahu with the hot-button slogans "Peres will divide Jerusalem" and "Bibi is good for the Jews." They exemplified his method of turning political disagreement into a stark choice between security and betrayal. Miller lectured Eisenkot and his advisers on the art of political positioning. Using a left-to-right axis, he made clear that Eisenkot would be wise to edge rightward to win voters on the center-right.

"What defines right and left—the Palestinians?" Eisenkot asked. Such questions, though, were anathema in mainstream political conversations after October 7th. Even Yair Golan, who would occupy the left flank of any opposition coalition led by Eisenkot, told me that although he was prepared to speak of two states as an eventual goal, the other opposition leaders were far more circumspect. Ultimately, Golan said, the choice facing Israelis is "annexation or separation." That is no secret to anyone.

Recent months had brought intense jockeying within the opposition. The former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, seeking to return to the office, had hoped to lead a broad alliance that included Golan, Lapid, Eisenkot, and Avigdor Lieberman, a hawk with strong support among immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Bennett had once led the Yesha Council, the settlers' umbrella organization, and later served as Netanyahu's minister of the economy. His party rose for a time in the polls, but Eisenkot was cool to the idea of accepting a subordinate role, and when Bennett and Lapid formed an alliance in April, under the name Beyachad, or Together, they gave him a last chance to join. He refused. His calculation was easy to discern: Why Bennett and not him?

The polls soon exposed Bennett's vulnerability. His alliance with Lapid cost him support on the right, while his hold on centrist voters had never been secure. (It was through the vagaries of coalition politics that Bennett had managed to become Prime Minister, in 2021, despite the fact that his party commanded just seven of the Knesset's hundred and twenty seats.)

People in Bennett's campaign were eager to warn me that, with Eisenkot as the opposition's leading figure, the election could become a "rerun" of previous challenges to Netanyahu led by center-left politicians: Gantz, Lapid, Tzipi Livni, and Isaac Herzog. "Gadi has a high sympathy rate, he lost his son, he's a likable guy," a campaign source said. "They think that will do the job." Bennett himself emphasized his own right-wing credentials on security. "If we want to win, we have to unite," he told me. "We have to learn from the mistakes of previous elections and get into a room and decide things until the smoke comes out. It's still early."

Eisenkot agreed about the need for unity, but he smiled and made clear that, in his mind, the leadership question had already been settled. He was even predicting what Netanyahu would do after losing. "I believe he'll take his package, like Viktor Orbán did," he told me. "I don't think he will stay in the opposition. I think he will retire."

Others were less certain. A source close to the Prime Minister described Israeli coalition politics to me as a "circus." Eisenkot could emerge from the election as the opposition's dominant figure and still fail to assemble a government. "And then, who knows?"

If Netanyahu did leave the scene, Eisenkot said, Israel would at least have a chance to ease its polarization and repair its standing abroad. This was the

core of his immediate ambition. "We have an opportunity now to build a real Jewish state," he said. "We'll have the ability to correct the terrible division created during Netanyahu's reign and bring Israel back to the values of David Ben-Gurion," a founder of the nation and its first Prime Minister.

Eisenkot's campaign headquarters occupies the second floor of a high-rise in Ramat HaSharon, north of Tel Aviv. His campaign manager, Ronen Manelis, is an astute former military-intelligence officer of Russian descent who first served under him during the second intifada near Nablus and later at the Kirya, the military complex in Tel Aviv. A brigadier general, Manelis was also the spokesman for the I.D.F. from 2017 to 2019. He is unabashed about selling a visitor on his candidate.

"Gadi has the gravitas to do this step-by-step work," Manelis told me on my first visit to Ramat HaSharon. "He is one of the cleverest people in Israel. He is shrewd, more of a politician than people think. He is lovable. People come up and kiss him. A cabdriver tells me he is *kadosh*, holy, like a god. He is what the country needs. This is Biden against Trump in 2020, a fight for the soul of the nation. The only one who can do it is Gadi. If we lose it, I am not sure we will have another chance."

He barely paused for breath. "For a generation, we've really known only one Prime Minister. So people believe you need the fluent English. The makeup. The teleprompter. The standing ovations in Congress. But we need something else. We need the antithesis."

And so on. Eventually, Manelis exhausted his urge to propagandize and began to show off his other role: the hard man prepared to fight Netanyahu with his own weapons. When I asked him about employing one of Arthur Finkelstein's epigones, he smiled and noted that several members of the staff had worked in Netanyahu's circle. He expressed admiration for Jonatan Urich, a Netanyahu media adviser who has been the subject of three criminal investigations.

"Look, you can't beat them if you don't play their game," Manelis said. "Unfortunately, Bibi succeeded with all this shit. If I want to win, I need people who know how to succeed." He did not care if the left-leaning *Haaretz* criticized the campaign for adopting Finkelstein's methods: "We're not going to beat Netanyahu appealing only to *Haaretz* readers. We need to bring voters from between the blocs."

By now, anyone in Israeli public life can anticipate Netanyahu's ugliest lines of attack. Chief among them will be an attempt to brand Eisenkot as pro-Arab. In an earlier election, Netanyahu warned that Arab voters were "coming in droves" to vote for the opposition. The tactic combines racism with hypocrisy. Although Palestinian Arabs make up roughly a fifth of Israel's population, forming a government dependent on Arab parties remains widely regarded as politically illegitimate. Still, Netanyahu himself explored the possibility of bringing into his coalition Mansour Abbas, the head of Ra'am, an Islamist Arab party in the Knesset, before Abbas instead joined the short-lived government led by Bennett and Lapid.

None of this will prevent Netanyahu from using the same weapon again. The most effective instrument of his so-called "poison machine" is Channel 14, an outlet that makes Fox News look like "Democracy Now!" For a time, the channel seemed reluctant to attack the father of a fallen soldier. No longer. Recently, it assailed Eisenkot's campaign for the sin of courting Arab voters.

Eisenkot's military record offers no certain protection from right-wing condemnation. In addition to having been Netanyahu's highest-ranking military commander, he served in Lebanon and the West Bank. He is closely associated with the Dahiya doctrine, which calls for the use of overwhelming and disproportionate force against areas from which hostile organizations operate, including extensive destruction of civilian infrastructure. (Dahiya refers to the predominantly Shiite southern suburbs of Beirut, where Hezbollah established one of its main strongholds.) But, in contemporary Israel, long service in the military or intelligence establishment can indicate a suspicious degree of moderation. Many former commanders, shaped by decades of fighting terrorism and watching negotiations fail, have concluded that two sovereign states or some form of separation from the Palestinians is essential, both as a moral principle and as a practical means of Israeli survival. Netanyahu will portray Eisenkot as belonging to that tribe. "In the past, a general always got his falafel for free," Nadav Eyal, a columnist for *Yedioth Ahronoth*, a major Israeli daily, told me. "Not today. Today, he is considered a lefty."

The campaign expects Netanyahu to use Eisenkot's long military career against him. One example is the so-called Azaria affair. In 2016, an Israeli soldier named Elor Azaria shot and killed a wounded Palestinian assailant who lay incapacitated on the ground. Eisenkot said that Azaria had violated the ethics of the Army, and backed his prosecution. Netanyahu, after seeing support for the soldier swell on social media, spoke with Azaria's father and urged "balance" in the proceedings.

Manelis does not hesitate to turn his candidate's bereavement into a political credential. "The fact that his son died is insurance that he won't do things that are dangerous for the nation," he told me. Manelis regards it as his job to prevent Netanyahu from defining Eisenkot first. With an air of mischief and pride, he took out his phone and showed me a video on Instagram featuring a Likud jingle sung in Arabic and a reminder of Netanyahu's courtship of Mansour Abbas. "I don't think it's racist," Manelis said. "We are using his terms—and we need to win."

He then showed me another campaign video. It reprises a Netanyahu ad from the 2015 campaign—"You will decide who will defend your children!"—while, thanks to A.I., Netanyahu wanders through the charred remains of kibbutzim torched by Hamas three years ago. "If you want to lose," Manelis told me, "don't use someone close to Arthur Finkelstein, don't do a negative campaign, speak only about the Palestinian issue, and say you love Mansour Abbas. Then see what happens in the fall."

As if to prove Manelis's point about the inevitability of a brutal confrontation, the Netanyahu campaign put out an A.I.-generated video in mid-July that seemed to transgress every boundary of taste and decency. The clip, which Netanyahu himself posted, showed Eisenkot running through a meadow toward a young man wearing a T-shirt with the motto "Israeli Unity" emblazoned on it. But Eisenkot ignores the young man and instead runs past him to embrace Mansour Abbas. News accounts through-

out Israel noted that the young man resembled Eisenkot's late son, Gal. Einav Zangauker, the mother of a son who had been held hostage in Gaza and a former supporter of the Prime Minister, was among the many in Israel who considered the video both despicable and typical of Netanyahu's campaign tactics. "When the video started playing and I saw Gadi running with open arms, the thought crossed my mind that, from the other side, we'd see his late son Gal running into his father's arms," she wrote on X. "A hug like that would have warmed the heart. But what was I thinking? This is Netanyahu."

One uncertainty haunting the Eisenkot campaign is Donald Trump. Will the American President intervene at the last moment to help Netanyahu? Manelis wondered whether Trump might do for Netanyahu what J. D. Vance had tried to do for Viktor Orbán by campaigning for him in Budapest. Yet it was unclear how much warmth, if any, remained in the relationship. Maggie Haberman and Jonathan Swan's recent book, "Regime Change," recounts a chilling telephone call in which Trump turned against Netanyahu: "Everybody's sick of you, Bibi. All the Jews are sick of you. Even the two Jews on this call are sick of you." Manelis remains mindful of the President's unpredictability; Trump may still prefer the devil he knows. "The game changer could be the Trump Administration," he told me.

Campaigns live from moment to moment, poll to poll. Eisenkot and the opposition as a whole were on the rise. One evening, Eisenkot's chief of staff, Noam Bar-Lev, handed Manelis her phone. He glanced at the screen and smiled broadly.

"Amazing," he said. "We had a good day on Polymarket!"

It was a hot summer morning on the road to Hebron, the second-largest city in the West Bank, after East Jerusalem. I was riding along with Yehuda Shaul, who served in Hebron in the I.D.F. during the second intifada. Later, in his disillusionment, he helped organize Breaking the Silence, an activist organization of Army veterans who document instances of settler violence and evidence of Israel's increasingly blatant attempt to absorb Palestinian land in the occupied territories without formally annexing it. The Tarqumiya checkpoint, which used to be crowded with Palestinians entering and leaving the West Bank in the south, was quiet. Since October 7th, Israeli security forces have cracked down on the movement of Palestinians throughout the West Bank. At the same time, there has been an alarming spike in settler violence across the region, from the villages near Jenin in the north to the Hebron Hills in the south. Young, armed settlers, many of them from small encampments and bent on intimidating Palestinian villagers, stage raids, slaughter farm animals, commit arson, and, all too often, inflict physical mayhem. Palestinians know that they can expect little help from Israeli forces, and still less from the police, which fall under Itamar Ben-Gvir's ministry.

I've visited Hebron many times over the years, and it seems only more menacing now. Large sections of town are ghostly quiet. Army troops enforce strict, perversely precise rules about where Palestinians may, or may not, walk and drive. There is a bewildering maze of "sterile" streets. And the Arabs in town rarely test the litany of restrictions. "For now, they look at Gaza and they know that Israelis behaved this way—there was no check on Israeli cruelty," Shaul said. "But there will come a moment when the young Palestinians say, 'Why are we accepting this?' This is a disaster waiting to happen, and I fear it will be like Rafah."

There are two hundred and thirty thousand Palestinians in Hebron; roughly eight hundred Jewish settlers are protected by an entire Army battalion. In Kiryat Arba, the major Jewish settlement in greater Hebron, there are around eight thousand souls, including Ben-Gvir himself. Shaul and I briefly stopped outside Ben-Gvir's house, which is heavily guarded by armed security. He lives there with his wife, Ayala, and their children. It is said that on their first date they visited the nearby grave of Baruch Goldstein, an American-born physician and settler. On February 25, 1994, Goldstein opened fire with an assault rifle on a crowd of Palestinians at prayer, killing twenty-nine and wounding a hundred and twenty-five.

Hebron is the Belfast of the West Bank—a place with far too much history, bloodshed, and religious fervor and not enough geography. For Jews, the massacre of 1929 was yesterday. For Palestinians, Goldstein lives. The Greater Israel movement gained one of its most consequential early footholds in Hebron,

"Is it the kind of whiskey that burns going down or the kind that first tastes smooth and then burns?"

in April, 1968, when Moshe Levinger, an Orthodox rabbi, and a small group of followers posing as Swiss tourists arrived at the Arab-owned Park Hotel for a Passover Seder. This was less than a year after Israel's victory in the Six-Day War, and its seizure of Gaza from the Egyptians and the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan. After the holiday, Levinger and his followers refused to leave—and, in effect, they never did, eventually establishing Kiryat Arba. This was an act that they regarded as similar to Abraham's acquisition of the Cave of the Patriarchs during the Bronze Age.

"The uniqueness of Hebron is in its spiritual essence, rooted in the dawn of our national history," Moshe Mayefsky, the official historian of Kiryat Arba, wrote. "The acquisition of the Land of Israel in its practical sense first took place here." This manner of settlement—seizure followed by the eventual acquiescence of the government—is part of a pattern that has characterized the occupation of the West Bank ever since.

In the late seventies, the Israeli journalist and historian Amos Elon interviewed Levinger in Hebron. He asked the rabbi if he favored giving the vote to the Arabs in Greater Israel. Levinger replied, "I agree the Arabs were also made in God's image. The trouble is, they're opposed to this being a *Jewish* state. Therefore, the Jewishness of this state must take precedence in value over their being created in the divine image. . . . Democracy must be subordinated to Israel's national and religious purposes. Do they grant civil rights to thieves and robbers in the United States?"

Levinger's legal adviser, Elyakim Haetzni, told Elon that he had left his law practice and leased his house in Tel Aviv to move to Hebron. "I am a deliriously happy man," he told Elon. "The Land is *here*, in Kiryat Arba, not in Tel Aviv. . . . Kiryat Arba does not exist to defend Tel Aviv from Arab attack, but the other way round. Tel Aviv exists to protect Kiryat Arba."

As Shaul and I walked through Hebron and discussed the recent surge in settler violence, he recalled his own service there as a young soldier. The Israelis conducted nighttime raids meant to intimidate the population, a practice they called "making our presence known." Now, with Ben-Gvir and Smotrich exercising broad power over the West Bank, the atmosphere was immeasurably more ominous.

"Have you ever seen an anti-colonial struggle where the native population is the majority and gives up?" Shaul said. "This is not the American Indians. The quiet in Hebron is camouflage. Look at the numbers. This is not China and Tibet. Israel doesn't have tens of millions of Jews to overwhelm the Palestinians. The ruthless geographical policies are a sign of weakness in the face of demography. That's how a minority rules."

His foreboding echoed what I had heard in Jaffa, from Rula Daood, one of the leaders of A Place for Us All, a small Arab-Jewish party. "Something will explode," she said. "You can't take the rights of people and think they will sit quietly." Daood recalled seeing a settler strip naked on the street in Hebron, deliberately affronting the religious Muslims around him. "It is another way of conquering the land," she told me.

Shaul and I drove out of Hebron and into the parched hills toward the village of Susya. Shepherds tended small flocks beside a road leading to a cluster of ramshackle dwellings. There we met Nasser Nawaja, an impassive man in his early forties who works as a field researcher for the human-rights group B'Tselem. He spends his days recording acts of settler violence in the hills and estimates that an incident occurs somewhere in the area every few hours.

Nawaja was born in 1982 in a cave in Old Susya. Four years later, after the Israeli authorities declared the village an archeological site, his family was among the residents expelled from their homes. Nawaja said that the most formative experience of his life came years later, when, at the age of seventeen, he was arrested with several other villagers. They were accused of a killing about which they knew nothing, and were interrogated through the night, bent over, "our noses and mouths in the dirt."

"In the morning, they realized that we had nothing to do with it and they released us," Nawaja said. "We approached the ridge near our house—and I didn't see our village! Where were our tents and our homes? When I got here, I saw people crying and faces black with dirt. The I.D.F. came and demolished the whole village. More than thirty families. Right where we are sitting now."

He recalled, "I was full of hatred. If you had given me a suicide belt, I hated Jews, I would go do it at that moment. I slept one night here, and I thought about what I went through and about revenge. The next morning, a bunch of Jews came here, buses of Jewish activists

who came to rebuild our homes. It shakes your brain! Who are they? Collaborators? Just yesterday, Jews had destroyed our homes. That made me think. That's when I understood ultimately that I was at a junction between becoming violent or taking a different path toward nonviolence. I chose that path."

The path has been difficult. Nawaja cares for an ailing, elderly father and a five-year-old daughter with profound physical and cognitive disabilities. He said that he has repeatedly been arrested and detained, and is barred from visiting the Al-Aqsa Mosque, in Jerusalem. "I am an enemy of the occupying regime," he said. "And, on the Palestinian side, you always feel you need to explain your position to those who don't understand Jewish and Palestinian activists."

When Nawaja and other activists call the police to report settler vandalism or violence, the officers sometimes take the activists themselves to a nearby base and interrogate them for hours. Police officers and settlers are often connected by friendship or family ties. "They treat animals better than they treat us," Nawaja said.

The plan, Nawaja believed, was clear: to "embitter" the lives of the more than three million Palestinians in the West Bank and, when the political circumstances permitted, annex the territory to a Greater Israel. It was the future that Moshe Levinger had imagined decades earlier.

Nawaja regards October 7th as having provided a "golden opportunity" for the radical right to advance its agenda. He is gravely concerned that, even if the October election ends the government of Netanyahu, Ben-Gvir, and Smotrich, an opposition government led by Eisenkot or someone else will lack the will or the political capacity to chart a radically different course.

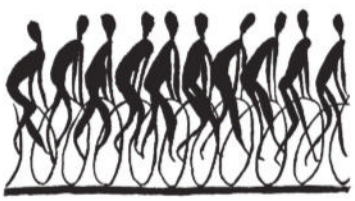
"The way I see it, there will be a change, but not a dramatic one," he said. "Eisenkot might 'protect democracy' and the courts in Israel, but when it comes to the Palestinians it won't change things much."

The alarm is hardly confined to Palestinian activists. In June, dozens of former leaders of the Israeli establishment, including Prime Ministers, generals, a Nobel laureate, and heads of Mossad, sent Netanyahu, Ben-Gvir, Smotrich, and other ministers a letter protesting "Jewish terrorism" in the West Bank. They cited acts of murder, sexual violence, and desecration of the dead, carried out, they said, with "almost complete impunity." Tamir Pardo, a former chief of Mossad, warned in the letter that the failure to halt such violence represented "an existential threat for the state of Israel and runs the risk of further slaughter in the manner of October 7th." The signatories threatened legal action and wrote that the violence in the West Bank was "reminiscent of similar crimes and pogroms committed against our people by other nations in eastern Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries."

Netanyahu did not respond. He generally reserves his Hebrew-language interviews for Channel 14 and speaks more freely to the foreign press. When he does address the crisis in the West Bank, he finds rhetorical means to diminish it. In a recent interview with CNN, he blamed the violence on a small group of young extremists, "a hundred and fifty or so what you would call juvenile delinquents" who were, he claimed, not themselves settlers.

Viewed from abroad, Netanyahu's grip on power can seem almost incomprehensible after years of scandal, brutality, and attacks on democratic institutions. Yet, despite his current peril in the polls, he may endure for a simple reason. He knows how to play on fear and has depicted himself as the only man ruthless enough to keep Israelis safe.

Nadav Eyal, the columnist for *Yedioth Ahronoth*, told me about meeting a



woman recently in Kfar Aza, one of the kibbutzim hit hardest by Hamas. She was crying and said that she could no longer live near Palestinians. "If Netanyahu wins, it's because of that," Eyal told me. "This is what people don't get. The sentiment in Israel, and Netanyahu understands it, is so powerfully about what has happened and how your worst fears were completely vindicated. From the outside, October 7th was another round of violence that ended with seventy thousand people dead. No, what happened on October 7th had never happened here before, a pogrom that triggered something here—the Jewish experience, over thousands of years. This is how Netanyahu gains power and maintains it. His skepticism, his distrust of the region around him, his devotion to the Iron Wall. His ability is to use the Israeli psyche. He represents a deep skepticism toward Arabs unless they accept Israel's dominance over the territory."

Eyal was describing the emotional terrain on which Netanyahu hoped to survive. The response that Eisenkot's campaign had decided on was less a contrasting ideology than a contrasting character. In late June, Eisenkot formally launched Yashar's campaign at an event center in Hod HaSharon, north of Tel Aviv. It was a smoothly run, thoroughly scripted affair. During an outdoor reception before the rally, I spotted Nahum Barnea, the dean of Israeli journalism. He is eighty-one and slender as a stalk, and travels to his appointments by bicycle. He has been the acerbic bane of many Prime Ministers, including Netanyahu, yet he seemed encouraged by Eisenkot's candidacy, particularly by its projection of a sense of decency.

"He can stop the bleeding in two areas," Barnea told me. The first was Israel's standing in the world. "Remember the old ad campaign for 7 UP? He is the 'un-cola.'" The second was the country's polarization, the bitterness of its political discourse. Eisenkot might embody a different kind of public figure. "He's misleading because people see an overweight guy, like a bear, very warm and informal. He doesn't look like a general. But he is hardly mediocre. He is serious. And, yes, he lost his son in war. He knows that his bereavement is a political advantage, and not cynically. He represents a going back to public service."

As "Golani Sheli," the anthem of Eisenkot's old brigade, boomed from the speakers, the candidate walked onstage to loud applause. There was little ideology in his appeal, certainly nothing about a Palestinian state. The campaign had been built around service, sacrifice, reform, and repair. Whether those themes could compete with the fears Netanyahu had spent years cultivating was a question that the election would decide. ♦

AMERICAN DAREDEVIL

What moves the star of "Jackass" to ride bulls and get shot out of cannons? A very serious investigation.

BY MOLLY YOUNG

Johnny Knoxville doesn't keep track of how many bones he's broken. When asked for a number earlier this summer, he balked. The notion of accounting struck Knoxville, the star and co-creator of the "Jackass" franchise, as silly. "Double digits," he told me after a long pause. "My ankles three times apiece. Arms. Hands. Elbows. A lot."

It was a load-bearing unit, that "a lot." Knoxville's other workplace injuries include a urethral tear, an orbital fracture resulting in globe luxation—in layman's terms, the partial popping out of his eyeball—herniated disks, lacerations, burns, and sixteen concussions. Only two of the original "Jackass" cast members remain in full possession of their own teeth, and Knoxville is not one of them.

The three TV seasons, five films, and plentiful offshoots that make up the global "Jackass" juggernaut share a no-frills format. In them, men (and, later, one woman) perform stunts and pranks. Some of the segments are one-liners promoted to three dimensions: a man farts into a trumpet, a man pole-vaults into a palm tree. Some make fanciful use of mousetraps, barrels, explosives, slingshots, stilts, toilets, tightropes, and other classic comedy props. There are gross-out gags ("Sweatsuit Cocktail," "Butt Piercing") and a tremendous amount of peniswork. Some stunts speak the universal language of physical comedy with a math-like elegance: a man dressed in a Velcro suit skateboards up a ramp and splats against the side of a passing truck that is also coated in Velcro, and, truckside, the man is conveyed offscreen. Nabokov's definition of humor as a "loss of balance—and appreciation of losing it" summarizes "Jackass"'s spirit and mechanics.

"Jackass" wouldn't work without its lovable ensemble cast, but Knoxville is the obvious ringleader. When you watch him crash into a fruit cart or electrocute his friends, it is tempting to think of him as a minor god sent down from Olympus for the amusement of higher entities—an emissary of mischief loosed upon mortals who are powerless to resist or understand him. "Get a load of this," you imagine Zeus saying as Knoxville Jet Skis through a garden hedge.

The star is famous for his laugh, which sounds like friendly fire, and for his face, which is remarkably handsome. But mostly he is famous for risking his life more often and more mirthfully than any of his peers. For the sake of the footage, Knoxville has been charged by a herd of bison while on roller skates, attacked by multiple bulls, flipped by a yak, shot from a cannon, strapped to a rocket, and knocked out by a heavyweight boxer. "Jackass" has inspired not only imitative TV shows and YouTube stars—Mr. Beast, the brothers Paul—but whole categories of the internet, including D.I.Y. prank content, challenge videos, and fail compilations.

Within the small group of professionals—football players, stuntmen, M.M.A. fighters—paid to destroy their bodies for mass entertainment, Knoxville, at fifty-five, has proved preposterously durable. Filming on the fifth and allegedly final film, "Jackass: Best and Last," wrapped in February, twenty-six years after the franchise premièred. That gives Knoxville a solid decade on Evel Knievel, and far more time than the average prizefighter.

For the past few years, he has rented a home in the Valley. His neighborhood has a suburban sense of self-control, with houses crouched behind tidy yards of drought-resistant flora. There are no sweeping views, no architectural triumphs. It is a neighborhood you'd sooner associate with a prosperous dentist than with a movie star. On a sunny weekday, Knoxville emerged from his home in bubblegum-pink board shorts and with omnidirectional silver hair, his face lacquered in sunblock. We planned to go for a surf.

The first south swell of the season had arrived and would soon climax in barrelling eight-foot waves along Southern California's coast. Knoxville, who is not an experienced surfer, was unflapped by the forecast. He slid into the driver's seat of a Chevy Tahoe and applied a pair of sunglasses. "Let's make some mistakes," he said, peeling out.

He headed west, up and over Malibu's humped green hills. As we descended toward the Pacific, the air and terrain grew salty. Parking lots overflowed. The first day of a seasonal swell is always a frenzied event, and we watched surfers sprint seaward as though gold had been discovered offshore. Point Dume, where Knoxville parked, is an enclave that managed to retain some of its beachside funk up through the nineteen-nineties. Now it is a place where Kamala Harris and Sergey Brin own houses.

"I surf like a crippled gorilla," Knoxville warned me on the sand as he zipped into a thick wetsuit. We watched a surfer drop into a wave and carve expert lines, smacking the lip to throw a jet of spray into his friend's face. (Hopefully his friend.) Knoxville climbed onto his board and paddled out, pausing halfway to untangle a kelp ribbon from his leash. Upon reaching the lineup, he sat upright. "I didn't think I was gonna make it!" he said.

While resting his arms, Knoxville commented appreciatively on the weather and the view of sandstone cliffs. He seemed pleased to be in the sun, pleased to be in the water, pleased to pee in his wetsuit. Occasionally, he zoned out, gazing far into the distance and dropping out of conversation. "Sorry," he said after one zone-out. "Sometimes I go to Tijuana for a moment."

When a set rolled in, Knoxville aimed unhesitatingly for a hefty wave. He windmilled past the surfer we'd admired from shore, who backed away in fear of carnage. The wave pitched. Knoxville popped up and flew a hundred yards toward the beach, as easy as a kid on a

"He's got a golden heart," Knoxville's cousin said. "The great mystery is what's going round and round inside that carnival brain."

PHOTOGRAPH BY JULIA JOHNSON

zipline. At the end of the ride, he dismounted, turned, and got creamed by an even heftier wave. His board shot skyward and vanished into a gyre of foam. His silvery head was lost in a tumble. All went quiet as the wave expended itself toward the shallows, and then the hush was broken by a hoot.

Those who know him best are baffled by Knoxville's—well, nobody agrees on what to call it. Daredevilry? Foolishness? Insanity? Compulsion? Damage? Courage? Masochism? "I don't know exactly how to describe it," Spike Jonze, who has produced every installment of "Jackass," said. "It doesn't come from outside. It's an inner quality." Knoxville's cousin Roger Alan Wade, who has known him longer than most people alive, was equally stumped: "He's got a golden heart and a soul to match. The great mystery is what's going round and round inside that carnival brain."

Knoxville's whatever-it-is topples the logic of moviemaking itself. Bankable leading men are not meant to imperil their lives by performing unrehearsed death-defying stunts. Medics on "Jackass" sets are instructed to hold back as much as possible, to avoid ruining good footage. "You're supposed to insure the leading man in a Hollywood feature film, keep him intact," the cast member Stephen Glover, alias Steve-O, said. "It makes no sense."

It made no sense to Knoxville's family and friends after the first broken bone, and they're no closer to understanding it now. He has won fame and fortune and critical acclaim for his stunts, but he might have finagled those things without sustaining quite so many traumatic brain injuries in the process. He has three children, a wife, and an extended family whom he loves. Nobody forced him to get in the bullring or turn a gun on himself. So why does he do it? What makes Johnny run?

For clues, it's best to begin with his Tennessee home town, from which he lifted his stage name. Born Philip John Clapp in 1971, Knoxville has unmistakable Southern origins. He has lived in Los Angeles long enough to have dropped "sir" and "ma'am" from his sentences, but the honorifics are still implied. Doors are held open, "please"s and "thank you"s delivered promptly. He is polite to the point of inefficiency, seeing to it that everyone within reach is comfortable and hydrated and has a ride to wherever they are headed next.

Knoxville's parents, Phil Clapp and Lemoyne Houck Clapp, attended rival high schools in Knoxville. Phil was a star athlete and a ham. Lemoyne was movie-star beautiful and made sure everyone knew it. The family lived in a split-level house with a double carport. There were woods in the back, rosebushes in the front, and a pony named Bo Diddley in the yard. Phil ran a tire company that he'd inherited from his father. Lemoyne baked black-bottom pies and managed the household. The neighborhood was close-knit; when Bo Diddley escaped his pen, the whole block fanned out to track him down.

Knoxville is the baby of the family, born seven and ten years, respectively, after his older sisters, Krisden and Lynne. It was an unplanned pregnancy. As an infant, Knoxville was voluptuously plump. At mealtimes, he ate so rapidly that it took a pit crew of Clapp females to refill the boy's Infa Feeder with purée. Other than feeding Bo Diddley, Knoxville was exempt from chores. "He never mowed the yard," Lynne said. "We babied him real bad." To spare their brother the trouble of walking, the girls carried him from place to place. When he was threatened with a spanking, they hid him from the parental hand. "It was like having a pet monkey," Wade, Knoxville's cousin, said. "All they needed was an organ-grinder."

Knoxville made trouble as soon as he could walk. If Lynne went to get her hair done at the beauty parlor, Knoxville might aim a water balloon at the fresh coif. If she had a date over to the house, he'd yank his underwear up like a sumo wrestler and streak through the den. None of this ruffled his mother. "P.J. could've killed the Pope and my mama would say, 'Pope deserved it,'" Lynne told me.

As long as the girls could remember, Knoxville was in and out of the hospital for asthma. Lemoyne kept a hawk eye on his breathing: her son would go quiet when he felt his airways narrowing. Several times a year, the family rushed him to the hospital mid-attack for an adrenaline injection. "Oh, my God!" Knoxville said, when asked about those visits. "I've done a lot of drugs in my time, and I've never had a rush like that." Adrenaline, he said, was like "sniffing an eight ball of cocaine all at once." He liked it very much.

Better than adrenaline was the feeling that followed. Later in life, Knoxville read about a set of experiments conducted by the Air Force researcher John Stapp, who was assigned to test how much force a body could withstand when ejected from a plane. Stapp had buckled himself into a rocket-powered sled and accelerated to more than six hundred miles per hour before slamming to a stop. In the hospital, he experienced what he called "survival euphoria." Strangely enough,

"One day, son, everything I swept under this rug will be yours."

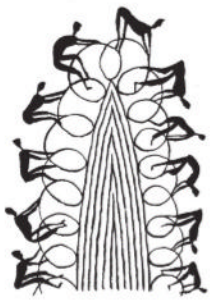
Stapp did not describe it as a sense of joy or relief. Instead, it drenched him in a hunger for greater risk. When Knoxville read about Stapp, he thought back to his childhood asthma attacks and oxygen masks and the adrenaline shots that pinned him to the wall before bringing back his breath, and how all of that compared to the post-stunt rush. *Yeah, that's it*, he thought. *Survival euphoria.*

A love of attention and a taste for adrenaline: two suggestive ingredients. To this brew, add Knoxville's father. "Trace it back to Phil," Wade said. "He was the genuine, authentic, original jackass." Phil ran his tire company as a merger of successful business and amateur circus. His associates had names like Ass-Kickin' Robert, Big George, Boxcar, and Super Dick. When he wasn't feeding the men milkshakes spiked with Ex-Lax or mailing fake I.R.S. audit letters to their homes, Phil amused himself with antics like the Mongoose Box: a contraption installed in his company's showroom with a sign reading "MONGOOSE: DO NOT TOUCH." "He put a rope around the box and said, 'Nobody go near. It's dangerous!'" Krisden told me. "Which of course only drew more attention to it." When customers got close to the box, Phil flipped a switch that ejected a spring-loaded stuffed animal. "People would jump out of their skin," Krisden said. "I have *no* idea where he got the ideas in his head."

At home, Phil liked to fling open the bathroom door and hurl a cup of ice water over the top of the shower onto his son. "That was an everyday thing," Lynne said. If Lemoyne had a P.T.A. meeting to attend, Phil might dress up as a drifter, wander into the meeting, and pinch his wife on the bum. He flew planes and staged gunfights with blank cartridges. "When it came to pure street smarts, I've never seen anyone who could hold a candle to it," Wade told me. "If he'd applied it to science, we'd be living on Mars. But he applied it to pranks." The way the world sees Knoxville today is exactly how a tiny corner of Tennessee once looked at Phil Clapp.

Same as anyone's childhood, there were good scenes and bad scenes. Phil was a drinker. He got loud, fought with Lemoyne, scared the children. "I was constantly feeling small and bullied," Knoxville said. Phil drove his son out to Los Angeles twice. The first time went fine. The second time, Phil was off the wagon. When they arrived in Arcadia, Knoxville watched his father pour a big glass half full of vodka, half full of water. "He took it with both hands like a little kid and just killed it," Knoxville said. "It broke my heart. He needed it so bad."

Phil died in 2018. When I first got in touch with Knoxville about writing a profile, he sent an e-mail full of old family photos: Phil suited and exultant on his wedding day, Phil laughing with baby Knoxville on his lap, Phil and son in matching pastel-blue outfits. The final photo shows Phil reclining in a La-Z-Boy beneath a light-up Christmas-tree trinket. Knoxville, then well into his twenties, sits on his father's lap. Both are beaming. "Me and my ol' man," he wrote as a caption. "I loved him so much and miss him dearly."



One last scene from childhood. To pass the time on hot summer days, Knoxville and a friend invented a game called Nutball. The rules were simple. Three to five children stripped to their undies and sat wide-legged in a circle on the floor, hurling billiard balls at one another's crotches. They could do this for hours. Some children fly kites, some children feed ducks, some children court genital trauma. By the time Knoxville moved to Los Angeles, in 1990, a successor to the Nutball gang was in its early stages.

If the descendants of "Jackass" are legion, the franchise itself has a single, unambiguous origin: a skateboarding magazine called *Big Brother*. Steve Rocco, the magazine's founder, is a California native who owned the successful skate company World Industries. In 1992, Rocco hired Jeff Tremaine, a young art-school graduate (and later the director of "Jackass"), as the editor. Spike Jonze, a childhood friend of Tremaine's (and a producer of "Jackass"), contributed photos. The magazine's writers included Sean Cliver (another producer) and Chris Pontius (a cast member); it featured skaters like Jason (Wee Man) Acuña (cast member) and lunatics like Steve-O (cast member).

Big Brother was fashioned as an anarchic alternative to more established skate magazines like *Thrasher* and *Transworld*, which Rocco deplored for their earnestness. The magazine's office, in El Segundo, was patched together from two-by-fours, sheet metal, and chicken wire. Where other magazines focussed on the mechanics of skating, *Big Brother's* stroke of genius was to consider itself—and here an unfortunate word must be enlisted—a "lifestyle" magazine.

Along with skate photos and interviews, the publication contained boobs, reviews of malt liquor, an account of surviving a Mexican prison, and tutorials on how to manufacture a fake I.D. or build a bong or snort lines of Pixy Stix sugar dust like cocaine. When Tremaine was advised that a magazine's title ought to be printed in large type for maximum newsstand visibility, he called a printer and inquired about the smallest printable font. The next issue had "Big Brother" hidden in four-point Helvetica on the cover's upper left-hand corner.

The magazine circulated as samizdat through bedrooms and school cafeterias—a boyosphere flourishing long before the manosphere reared its ugly head. What seemed miraculous to the magazine's readership was the result of a traditional formula for creative success: assemble raw talent, shower them in cash, taunt them with an adversary, and remove supervision. Decades before the phrase "parasocial relationship" became shorthand for the psychology of influencing, *Big Brother* staffers appeared in its pages like recurring sitcom characters. Readers wrote in to extend inside jokes that persisted for years. The "Jackass" cast member Dave England told me that the first time he read the magazine he thought, *I wish I knew these guys.*

Knoxville had been kicking around Los Angeles a while before he entered the *Big Brother* orbit. Directly after graduating high school, he enrolled in an eight-week acting program at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, in Pasadena. His stage experience at the time consisted of two school plays. What made Johnny run west may not have been a love of the stage but a desire for eyeballs, lots of eyeballs, and he seemed

to arrive at acting by a process of elimination: a sports injury left him unfit for college baseball, and a tin ear rendered him ineligible for rock stardom. "I knew he wasn't cut out to live in South Knoxville," his sister Lynne said. "But I also knew that if he didn't do something grand he wasn't gonna have a penny. Because he *wasn't* gonna work."

Knoxville rented a run-down apartment in Hollywood, where he embraced the region's historic economy of waiting tables, auditioning for commercials, and depositing checks from his mother. There were other odd jobs: hotel bellhop, mover, Little League umpire. A florist paid him to dress up as a pterodactyl and stand on Coldwater Canyon Avenue promoting the business. Knoxville was fired after forty-five minutes for humping a phone booth in the costume.

He met Tremaine on the set of a music video. Although Knoxville didn't skate, he saw in *Big Brother* a crew of adventurers whose inclinations overlapped with his own. The type of skating featured in the magazine required obsessive repetition, a demonic pain threshold, and a pirate's eye for identifying the types of public and private property best suited for plundering. You couldn't have engineered a better candidate pool for Knoxville's future gang, a better training camp for his cast.

But it was more than that. Skating habituates a person to failure. The quantity of trial and error necessary to land a trick is enormous—a person might try and fail a hundred times—and it usually occurs before a pitiless jury of one's peers. How, in these circumstances, could anyone not develop a Zen-like sense of proportion around defeat? The mind-set translated seamlessly to "Jackass," where the biggest wipeout draws the biggest laugh.

Knoxville pitched a story to *Big Brother* about testing self-defense equipment, including a can of pepper spray, a stun gun, a Taser, and a bulletproof vest. The test subject would be the author. "Film it," Tremaine told Knoxville. The resulting tape shows a young man screaming on the ground after a blast of pepper spray, collapsing by force of Taser, writhing under a hundred and twenty thousand volts of stun gun. It sounds like footage that might be featured on a "60 Minutes" special about a crisis of risk-taking behavior in youth. But the Knoxville who appears onscreen—twenty-seven years old, forged of rubber and courage, wrapped in an American flag as a cape—is proof that charisma can enchant anything in its path. Yet another symmetry with skateboarding: "You can do the hardest trick, but if it looks robotic nobody wants to see it," Bam Margera, a cast member, told me. "You want to look like you're not burning calories. Like you're floating with no care in the world. Buttery, effortless, simple."

Knoxville's hardest trick involved the bulletproof vest, which he planned to strap on and test by coaxing a friend to shoot him with a .38-calibre Smith & Wesson. The shooter backed out at the last minute, not wanting to implicate himself in a possible murder. The videographer also backed out, not wanting to implicate himself in a possible snuff film—but not before Knoxville persuaded him to prop the camera on a surface and train it in the right direction. For extra protection, he stuffed a few porn mags under his Kevlar vest—two copies of *Hustler*, two copies of *Leg World*—then shot himself in the stomach. The tape shows him rearing back, catching himself from falling, and jumping into a getaway car. A powder burn is singed into his T-shirt. When Tremaine saw the footage, he called Spike Jonze. "I think there's a TV show in here," he said.

"Jackass" débuted on MTV in 2000. Knoxville's cast was drawn almost entirely from skateboarding, and the cheap-and-fast aesthetic of the show was imported wholesale from skate videos. "People like us could film what boys have been doing since the dawn of time," Dave Carnie, an editor at *Big Brother*, said. "You know that Henry VIII, as a boy, was doing 'Jackass' shit. He just didn't have a camcorder." It was possible, Carnie said, to posit a crude material explanation for the genesis of the show: "We were dumb kids with new toys."

The show was a quick hit and a quick flash point. A few months after it premièred, a thirteen-year-old boy in Connecticut lit himself on fire in an apparent imitation of a sketch. At least two other copycat incidents followed. Senator Joe Lieberman, who was on a tear about violence in the media, prevailed upon MTV to cancel or reform the show. The network issued a statement disclaiming responsibility but noting that "obviously we feel horrible when a young person does something to hurt themselves"—then proceeded to produce another season of a show in which young people did always and only that.

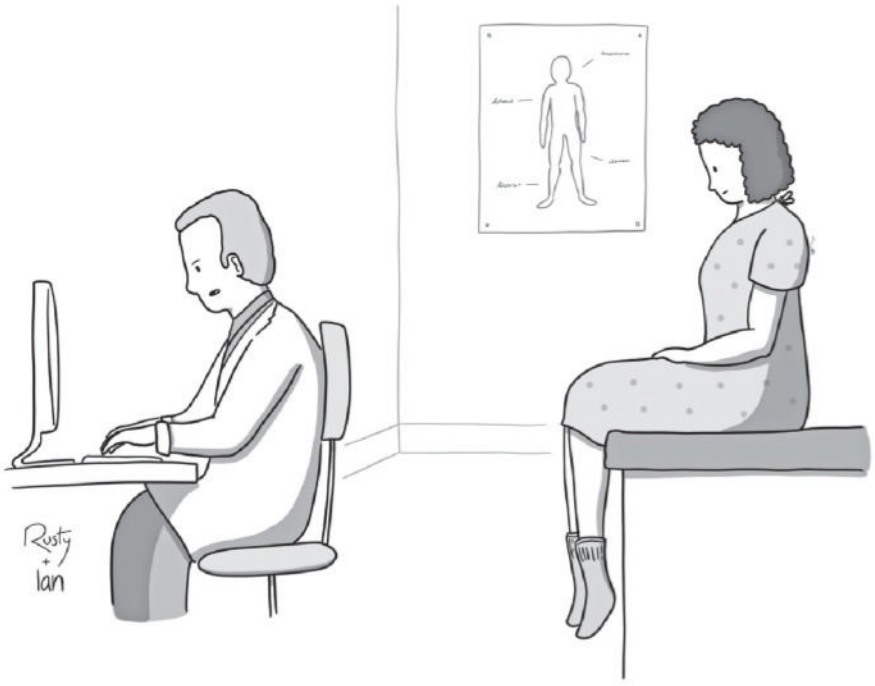
MTV brought on a safety supervisor to review stunt ideas. "This guy was trying to apply run-of-the-mill workplace OSHA standards to anything and everything we wanted to do," Sean Cliver, a producer, said. There were tussles over stunts like "Poo Diaper," in which Dave England, dressed in raggedy clothes, approaches a public trash can, digs around, retrieves a soiled diaper, and eats its contents. (The diaper had been pre-filled with chocolate pudding.) MTV strongly objected to "Poo Diaper." Inevitably, the show's spectacular success had drawn eyeballs of the wrong kind. It seemed to Knoxville that the network suddenly had a lot of tedious opinions about the location of lines (everywhere) and the advisability of crossing them (almost never). After three seasons, he quit. The show was no longer fun, and he had bigger aspirations.

"Jackass: The Movie" was released in 2002 and grossed eighty million dollars worldwide. The third film, "Jackass 3D," doubled that figure. Because "*OW!*" is roughly the same in every language, bits like "Lamborghini Tooth Pull" and "The Bungee Wedgie" and "Anaconda Ball Pit" and "Ass Kicked by Girl" and "Beehive Tetherball" transmitted laglessly across the globe. Each segment might have been subtitled "The Joy of Boys." The spectacle of play was intoxicating. "Play cannot be denied," the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga once wrote. "You can deny, if you like, nearly all abstractions: justice, beauty, truth, goodness, mind, God. You can deny seriousness, but not play." The gang went on tour, launched spinoffs, and rejoiced in the genesis of a novel female organism: the "Jackass" groupie.

Boys need fuel, of course. Along with cheeseburgers and beer—Miller High Life sponsored the first two movies—the cast gobbled mountains of drugs. "Jackass: The Movie" was (unofficially) underwritten

by analgesics. "We *loved* pain pills," Knoxville said, adding that a rough encounter with a morphine lollipop eventually led him to a rule of never going beyond Vicodin. Success called for accelerants. "Adderall drove the second and third films," Knoxville said. "We were highly focussed!" I observed that most of the cast would seem medically eligible for Adderall, anyway. "Everyone's got *something*," Knoxville said. "You don't get footage like that without people having something."

The "Jackass" films don't aspire to the level of art, but they possess art's ability to change the way a person sees the world. Even if only for an hour after exiting the theatre, familiar landscapes sparkle with objects that might be toppled or ignited or thrown down a staircase. Suburban malls, city intersections, country roads: everything becomes a field of unexploded comic ordnance.



"Hi, I'm Dr. Harmon, and this is the computer I'll be staring at for your entire appointment."

• •

On a Thursday afternoon, Knoxville was scheduled to go straight from a podcast interview to "Jimmy Kimmel Live!" To ready himself for prime time, Knoxville had placed a dab of pomade in his hair and spoken on the phone with a producer for a few minutes. No other preparation was needed.

Though he beat a straight path to fame, Knoxville bears no trace of the administrative neediness that afflicts many celebrities—the constant requests for a bottle of water, a phone charger, a vape, an iced coffee, a reminder of what time it is. He replies to texts. He remembers birthdays. If Knoxville's "Jackass" presence has the kind of detonative propulsion more typically observed in cephalopods and volcanoes than in human men, his private presence is reserved. What does he have to prove?

When the podcast wrapped, Knoxville left the recording studio and slid into his 1970 Cadillac Eldorado, which sat in a parking lot sucking heat into its black interior. He turned the key. The Cadillac vibrated like a cat on a warm lap. There were ashtrays built into the armrests and a console-mounted eight-track.

Even in Hollywood, a vintage Cadillac is an attention-grabbing vehicle. Halfway to "Kimmel," a cop car glued itself to our tail. "We're being followed," Knoxville said—and then, under his breath, "It's because I'm driving weird." The cruiser eased up alongside us. When the officer saw who was behind the wheel, he flashed a peace sign and moved on. Here is one way to measure a celebrity's approval rating: by whether an officer of the law is more or less likely to issue a ticket after clocking the driver's identity.

At the lot, "Kimmel" staffers in black suits showed Knoxville into an alley bookended by chain-link fences. Autograph seekers crested and frothed over the barriers, teetering on ladders they'd dragged from home. "It's the same guys every time," a security guard told me. "They sell the autographs to whomever."

Happy to abet the hustle, Knoxville signed posters until a producer came out and corralled him inside.

"There's a raccoon loose in the building," the producer told him.

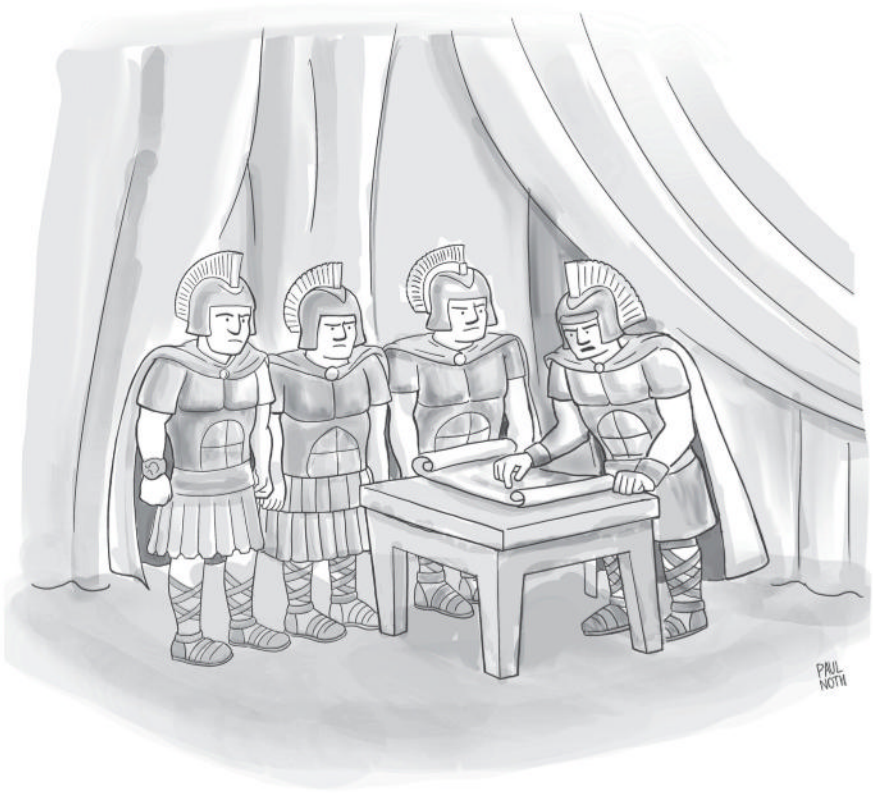
"Oh, boy!" Knoxville said.

Discussion of the at-large raccoon continued into the greenroom, where a scented candle with a moody odor flickered on a side table. The producer sat down to review the run of show. Did Knoxville like the idea of doing something around the raccoon? He did. What if Knoxville came onstage holding a fake raccoon by the tail, claiming to have caught the bastard? Great!

Knoxville is friendly with Kimmel and has appeared on the show twenty-one times. As people cycled in and out of the greenroom, one woman confessed that, despite knowing Knoxville for years, she still wasn't sure what to call him. Was it P.J.? Or Johnny? Or should she stick to Knoxville?

This is a widespread area of uncertainty. "I remember going through the entirety of shooting 'Jackass Forever' not knowing what to call him," Emily Ting, his wife, said. (Ting worked as a costume designer on the last two films.) It doesn't help that he signs e-mails, and sometimes texts, with "Señor Tango" or "Puddin'" or "the South Knoxville Strong Boy" or "Abraham Lincoln Jenkins" or "Edward James Almost." Because fame exempts Knoxville from the standard rite of a formal introduction, a surprising number of people in his orbit resort to evasion. ("Hey, man/amigo/buddy.") For the most recent film, Ting landed on a policy of calling her husband P.J. at home and Knoxville at work.

When the taping began, everyone migrated to a holding pen with a bar and tasteful arrangements of cacti. Knoxville got a whiskey and watched



"The Trojans have only one weakness—equine collectibles."

• •

from a monitor. A fake raccoon zoomed around Kimmel's stage in a tiny car full of walnuts.

When summoned by the producer, Knoxville presented himself to Ting for final outfit approval, then left. He reappeared seconds later on the monitor, holding the raccoon. "I caught him," he told Kimmel, dangling the prop animal. "He's not dead. He just got into my whiskey backstage. Let him sleep it off."

The bit worked. Watching Knoxville enter performance mode was like watching a glass of still water become carbonated. Same flavor, but tingly.

After "Kimmel" wrapped, Knoxville got back in the Cadillac and drove to In-N-Out for a snack. He nosed the car into the drive-through line, drawing stares as he nosed—some for the vehicle, some for the driver. Mostly male stares. A teenage boy stepped up to the passenger window and leaned in to take his order.

"One hamburger with tomato, lettuce, and mustard," Knoxville said. "Fries, please. And a cup of water."

"Onion?"

"No, sir."

The teen-ager squinted. "You look familiar. Are you famous, by any chance?"

"Actually, *completely* by chance!" Knoxville improvised.

"Jackass Forever," which came out in 2022, was meant to be the final installment. Twelve years had passed since the previous film—an eternity in Hollywood, and in the biological lives of stuntmen. Knoxville wasn't sure if audiences would care about the high jinks of middle-aged men. But the film was another hit, grossing eighty million dollars worldwide. Instead of the usual I-can't-believe-they're-doing-that reaction, audiences reacted with I-can't-believe-they're-*still*-doing-that: a minor but effective update. Midway through filming, Knoxville decided to stop dyeing his hair, which had turned white in his twenties. A visibly wrinkled and graying cast, it turned out, only underlined what "Jackass" had promised all along: that men can be boys at any age.

The film was released in the twilight of the #MeToo movement, when male self-scrutiny was at its most squeamish. As countless books and articles palpated the question of whether it was possible to be an unproblematic man, "Jackass Forever" offered its own (totally unintended) solution to the crisis of masculinity: just don't become a man. Get off the train at the "boy" stop and proceed no further. Cultural expectations of men change at lightning speed, but boys will be boys will be boys. That's one reason the "Jackass" movies have aged well—or, rather, have not aged at all. They belong to the world of "What, me worry?" and "Looney Tunes" and the rampaging ding-dongs of Bruegel's "Children's Games."

Though the movies reject machismo, they still revel in punishment. Steve-O described the cast as "attention whores battling for screen time. The more terrible the thing that happens to you, the more likely you'll make the cut." You don't have to be a sociologist to recognize the hazards of this dynamic. If the respect of a person's peers—not to mention his paycheck and access to SAG health insurance—hangs on his willingness to rupture a testicle with a pogo stick, the notion of "consent" wobbles. The jackasses are friends, accomplices, and rivals. Together, they've had fun and made gobs of money and partied their brains out, but they've also harmed each other irreparably.

Among the cast it is tacitly acknowledged that Knoxville is the chief instigator of damage. "Even in the most serious of situations," Sean Cliver said, "Knoxville can't help himself if he sees an opening." By "opening," Cliver meant the opportunity to pitch an object at someone else's nuts. "We're all so P.T.S.D.'d from this over the years that we could be standing at a funeral and most everyone would still have one hand cupped over their groin." Nobody is safe on set. "You gotta keep your wits about you," Preston Lacy, a cast member, said. "Stay vigilant. Like a fighter pilot." When I asked Spike Jonze if there was any way to declare oneself off-limits from Knoxville's sprees, he had to stop and think hard about the question. "Not that I'm aware of," Jonze finally said. "No, I'm pretty sure there's not. It's a little stressful, especially if you're operating a camera."

Certain people, Cliver said, may need to "distance themselves" from Knoxville, because "when he sets his mind to a prank there really are no bounds to what he can dream up." In 2024, a segment producer

from a non-"Jackass" show brought a lawsuit alleging that Knoxville had nonconsensually chased him down and Tased him, resulting in a number of injuries. (The case has been settled.) "All play is a voluntary activity," Huizinga, the historian, wrote. It can only be conducted by choice and in freedom. You can't compel someone to play, especially with a conducted-energy weapon.

If Knoxville has a sadistic streak, his cruelest target is always himself. "I have treated a boxer, football players, other athletes," David Kipper, Knoxville's physician of two decades, told me. "But nothing like him. Knoxville's injuries are not a consequence of his work. In some ways, they are the purpose of his work." Of his patient's many exotic ailments, it was the urethral tear, in 2008, that stood out to the doctor. The injury occurred during a botched motorcycle stunt. "Now, if you're a guy and you hear the phrase 'self-catheterization,' you start crossing your legs," he said. Knoxville had to catheterize himself multiple times a day for more than three years. "He was so laissez-faire," Kipper said. "That was pretty manly of him." He added, "Amazingly, he was still able to make babies after the injury."

Because daredevilry is not a sport and has no rules, there is no consensus on what might constitute a career-ending injury. Kipper advised Knoxville to hang up the cape in 2022, when his patient suffered a severe concussion and a brain hemorrhage while filming "Jackass Forever." In the stunt, Knoxville steps into a bullring with a flourish. The bull charges and hits his target, flipping Knoxville roughly five hundred and forty degrees in the air. Those who were present remember it in snapshots: the crack of skull against hard-packed dirt, the crumple of Knoxville's body, the medics who disregarded their customary order to hover off camera. Knoxville remembers almost nothing.

The months that followed, he said, were a period of "almost sliding off the earth." Knoxville's mind turned to guacamole. His speech declined; he avoided friends; his second marriage ended. Trips to Tijuana lasted longer than they should have. He took antidepressants for the first time in his life. "Here's a dark reality," Steve-O said. "My father is eighty-three years old, and every time I speak with him I'm searching for any indication that his cognitive awareness has diminished and that dementia is setting in. It's really dark and messed up that I have those same antennae up in every conversation I have with Knoxville."

Interviewers occasionally ask Knoxville if he worries about chronic traumatic encephalopathy—or, as the podcaster Dax Shepard put it, "whatever the football thing is." In these conversations, Knoxville will acknowledge that C.T.E. is an area of concern, and that it cannot yet be diagnosed in a living person. Sometimes he'll crack a little joke about it, saying, "I didn't win any awards for my brain scans."

Dave Carnie told me that "Jackass" was "best appreciated without giving it too much thought." Knoxville himself excels at selective underthinking. The bull hit was not his first scrap with the animal that day. In an earlier take, the bull had charged and struck him—but not, in Knoxville's opinion, hard enough for strong footage, so he'd insisted on a second round. And that was the end. During his six months of recovery, Knoxville found within himself a previously undetected shred of the self-preservation instinct. The days of bulls and rockets and demolition derbies were over.

In May, I attended a test screening of "Jackass: Best and Last" at the Paramount lot. The theatre was stocked with members of the target demo: men aged sixteen to forty. There were baseball hats and hand tattoos, mustaches hesitantly attempted and manfully achieved. There was even a mini altercation: just before showtime, two young men spotted each other across the room, hissed in confrontation, affected to converge, submitted to the calming attempts of bystanders, and took their seats.

Knoxville entered the room as the lights went down. He sat in the center of the fourth row and propped a clipboard on his lap. The screen lit up. "Jackass: Best and Last" mixes new and old footage, and the earlier clips are electrified by Knoxville's cult-leader mania. In the new footage, which was filmed across five days in Santa Clarita, he emits a geniality that can visibly fade into resignation.

In the first ten minutes of the movie, someone offscreen asks Knoxville how he feels. "I'm sad," he replies. No kidding.

There's a Hemingway story, "The Undefeated," about a veteran bullfighter who can't keep himself out of the ring. Having barely recovered from a nasty injury, the bullfighter begs a promoter to give him a fight. The promoter agrees. With cash advance in hand, the bullfighter meets a friend at a bar. The friend warns him—over and over—that he's too old to get in the ring. "What do you keep on doing it for?" the friend asks.

"I don't know," the bullfighter says. The next night, he is gored.

About the past, Knoxville is almost mystically serene. He doesn't complain about back pain. He doesn't dwell on mistakes. He's fond of sayings like "The toothpaste is already out of the tube." Unlike other cast members, he's never once had a nightmare about filming "Jackass." His wife says that he laughs in his sleep.

When he worries at all, he worries about the future. What will happen now that he can't play the way he used to? Will the appetite fade from want of opportunity or explode from lack of outlet? If Johnny can't run, what's left?

Part of him finds the question ridiculous. These days, Knoxville behaves like a person with plenty to lose. He spends time with his family. He eats protein and steamed vegetables, goes on walks and hikes, drinks water. He takes finasteride to support hair growth. He moisturizes. On a pretty evening in June, with the Cadillac parked near Sunset under a strawberry sky, he talked through the many wonders life has dropped in his lap. "Everything's happened at a fortunate time," he said, gazing out the window at a man dressed as a pirate. "I'm finally happy. I'm in a really great place. My kids are growing up. They're flourishing. I've met the person I'm supposed to be with. What more can you want?"

He scarcely paused before answering his own question.

"I do miss it sometimes. But I'm trying not to."

Knoxville doesn't keep track of how many bones he's broken, but he'll tell anyone who listens about his sixteen concussions—not to boast, but from some idea that saying the absurd number out loud will dampen his longing for stunts. "I'm still not there yet, and maybe I never will be," he said. "I guess it's the price I'll pay for trying to make cartoons come to life." ♦

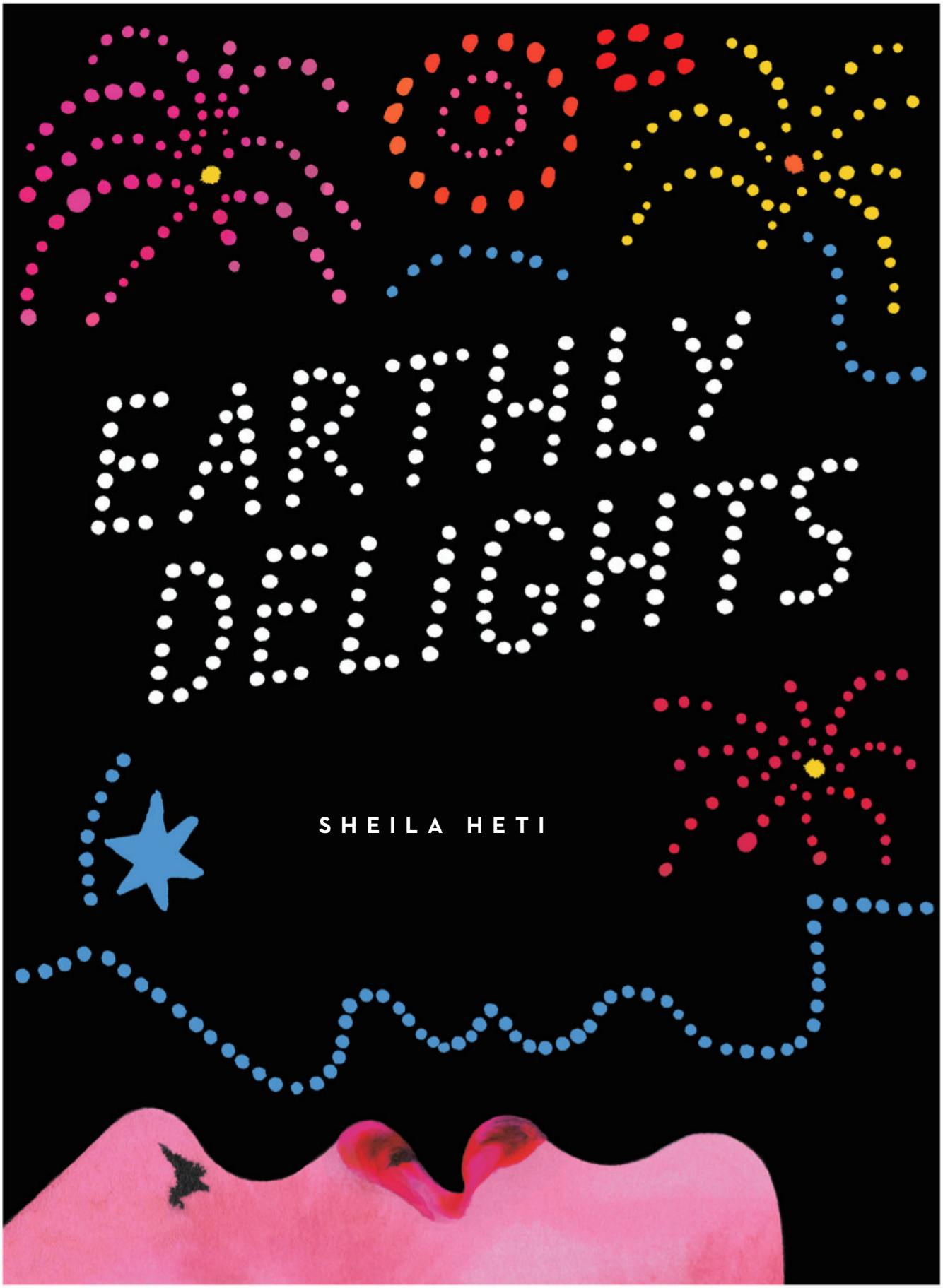


ILLUSTRATION BY MARIA-INES GUL

She had wanted only the simplest, smallest things: she kept a box of maxi pads hopefully in the back of her sock drawer for years before she ever got her first period. There were little squiggles on the packaging, teal and pink, in the flamboyant yet cool style of the day.

Then, later, with her childhood friend, their plan was to lose their virginity together, on the same bed, holding hands, one boy having sex with her, the other boy having sex with her friend. They agreed and made the pact and looked forward to it. In a way, it would be like losing their virginity *to each other*. That would be good, for they didn't mean each other any harm. With a boy, you couldn't know.

The point was: being someone's girlfriend was never as good or romantic as *wanting* to be their girlfriend had been. She learned this when she was fifteen, the first time she ever had a boyfriend. For one thing, she didn't enjoy giving hand jobs. They would be in Ivan's basement, watching TV, her hand pulling lamely on his dick—it was completely unerotic. She was clearly missing the point. Something was not right. Now, of course, she understood: he wasn't doing anything in return. He hadn't gotten her in the mood. He probably just asked for a hand job. They had been watching "The Cosby Show," she remembered, and she found touching his dick disgusting. She remembered saying to him, "Finish yourself off," then getting up and washing her hands in his parents' laundry room. That was what all the longing for him—all the admiring him, the dreaming of him, the glancing at him shyly all year in biology class; all the writing of two hundred poems about him—that was what it had all been *for*? This uncircumcised bit of flesh in her hand? How much more promising had been his bowl of floppy brown hair and glasses, his intelligence, and the fact that he was Czech and the class clown. Then, after a year of longing, it turned out he liked her, too! When they kissed, Ivan said, "You don't know how long I've been wanting to do that." Unfortunately, Ayesha, his previous girlfriend, told her friends that the first time Ivan kissed her, he said, "You don't know how long I've been wanting to do that." So much for her first kiss. It was just a copy of some other girl's kiss! Why did she even *know* what he'd said to Ayesha the first time he kissed her? She wasn't friends with Ayesha. They didn't have friends in common—Ayesha was in the grade above! And yet she *did* know. He could never have guessed that this was information she'd have. Where had Ivan picked up that line? From a movie? Or is that what he really felt each time, spontaneously and authentically, first with Ayesha, then with her, forgetting he ever said it before?

Then his family went on a trip to Prague, and he wrote her a letter from the airplane—wrote her a letter on a barf bag! Her first-ever letter from a boy. Didn't he know how disappointing, embarrassing, and unromantic this was? She couldn't tell her friends, "He wrote me a letter on a barf bag." To be the girlfriend of the class clown was different from admiring the class clown. You couldn't tell anyone what it was like.

"Have you heard from Ivan?"

"No. He's in Prague."

"I *know* he's in Prague. I'm asking if he sent you a letter?"

"He didn't send me a letter."

The way Pier smiled at her on the dance floor! He hadn't been at his most attractive, smiling in that way. But that smile—that's what she kept coming back to in the weeks after New Year's Eve. He was *happy*—that's what the smile said. He was so happy to be there with her, dancing. It seemed almost goofy, how happy it made him, to be dancing at a bit of a distance from her, looking at her like that. Why had it made him happy to look at her? Who was *she*? What was so good about her that it should have made him so happy? It bewildered her, so she hadn't found it attractive. But then, weeks later, it was the most attractive and, really, the most exciting part. She had never seen that look on a man's face before. There was a kind of wonder in it. Like he was thirteen. Like he couldn't believe he was dancing with a *girl*, this man whom all the women at the New Year's Eve party had liked, or at least the two who'd said so. When she asked Lynn which of the guests she was enjoying talking to, Lynn said, "Uh . . . Pier?" Then she giggled, and said it again, "Pier . . . ?" As if she was too struck by Pier to remember who else she was enjoying talking to, Pier obliterating them all. Then, there was the tall woman who monopolized him all night, cutting into other women's conversations with him, sitting next to him at the dinner table, always right there by his side . . . but Pier had liked *her*. That's what she felt—he really, really liked her. And she liked him, too. That's all it was, such a simple thing. A simple, beautiful thing—so rare and nice in this horrible world. How she wanted to hold on to the memory of it, and she *did*.

These were *exactly* the things to hold on to in this life; these were exactly the things which made life so beautiful. It was O.K. to hold them close, to let them make you so pleased. To draw pleasure out of such a simple thing—why not keep drawing and drawing until there was no more pleasure to be wrung from that beautiful liking for each other they had? Why not wring it dry, over as long a time as possible—a few drops here, a few drops there. After all, everything in this life dried up—except love. Love could never be wrung dry. If it could, it wasn't true love. This thing with Pier wasn't necessarily love—it would probably run dry—but did that make it any less good *now*? She was just happy that she had been with him in that little slice of time and space, in that tiny slice of the universe's eternal life. Just a little shard of eternity that had both of them in it, on the dance floor. That evening would exist forever, suspended, discrete and complete, in the eternal present of time and space.

There were no friends to talk about it with. "You danced with a guy?" they would say. "At a party? So? How old are you? *Thirteen*?" Was it possible that she and Pier were thirteen somehow, that their souls, together, became thirteen—and would stay thirteen forever—or that this is what happened to them when they met, that *thirteen* was the string between them?

"Wait—you're talking about *Pier*?"

They knew Pier and that he was no good, and they were not fascinated

by him. Was he, therefore, a *bad boy*?

"You always only like assholes," her friend complained, the one who had thrown the party. Pier was her husband's friend. Colleague, really. "Why do you like assholes so much?"

"Pier is not an asshole," she said, but she didn't know. The idea that he was an asshole, and that she only liked assholes, excited her and made her feel a little bit proud, like she was secretly better than everyone else.

Returning to her city from the party, she had sat on the train and looked out the window and listened to songs that made her think of him. Some songs she played ten or twelve times in a row, songs she had never before liked, with lyrics such as *It felt like springtime on this February morning/In a courtyard, birds were singing your praise/I'm still recalling things you said/To make me feel all right/I carry them with me today*. . . . She smiled to herself. It *was* practically February, and yet it *did* feel like springtime. The musician was probably singing about some "asshole" whom none of her friends liked, but whom the singer wanted to fuck more than she had ever wanted to fuck anyone ever. And she had made this sweet and beautiful song out of it. The same was true of her: she had never wanted to fuck anyone as much as she wanted to fuck Pier, and yet inside her the feeling was so sweet, and so beautiful. Too bad she had a boyfriend, and Pier, she guessed, a wife.

She got home from the party and bought a shapely rubber thing and fucked herself so hard with it, pretending it was him—she did this for weeks. She had never done something like that before. Another time, driving down the highway, she had to pull off; she had made herself so dizzy just thinking about him that she thought she was going to crash the car. She calmed herself down, then continued on her way.

It was a gift from God, this desire—which was now a memory of desire. But a memory of desire *is* desire, and it kept coming back to her over the years; Pier. They did run into each other again—seven times! And each time the same excitement was there, and each time they did nothing: treated each other like they treated everyone else in the room, although something very special was hanging between them. But they pretended there was nothing special between them, but she *knew* there was. It had turned on at that New Year's party, and it never turned off. Several of those next times, saying goodbye, they fumbled their hugs and nearly kissed each other, but withdrew, laughing, pretending it hadn't happened. Had she *asked* for this? It was God who put this man in front of her. It was God who was to blame.

And when she let herself dream of Pier she didn't think about the disappointment of those early afternoons, giving hand jobs while watching "The Cosby Show." Instead, she imagined that somehow she and Pier would meet again, when both of them were free. They just *had* to. Then, if he one day put his penis inside her, it would be like all her dreams of fucking him. It would be that good. It would mimic *her* mind, not *his* mind. Even if no sexual or romantic experience with a boy had ever, *ever* mimicked her mind. Still, she believed.

After she died, God took her into his arms and showed her a little marble that contained her and Pier dancing on New Year's Eve. He said to her, "Your friends called you 'boy crazy' and said you liked assholes, but I gave you the gift of desire and you used it properly: in private. The whole point of it was to enlarge your inner world, and it *did* that. I put that sodden penis in your hand when you were fifteen, too."

"But why?"

"It's a secret."

She didn't know if she was in Heaven or what. "Is this Heaven?" she asked.

God gave her the marble and then disappeared. She looked into it: she and Pier dancing. She had never gotten bored, thinking of Pier—for decades, whenever she remembered the night they met, it had completely thrilled her. She had left the boyfriend she'd been with at the time of the party, the one who spent every New Year's in a cabin, alone. Then she met Roy, who became hers for life, and their love and sex had nothing to do with fantasy. She just liked the way her body felt when it was in the same room as his body. Her body felt alive and good whenever his body was anywhere near. And so they lived together for the rest of time, because his body felt the same way. They didn't really understand it, but they called it love.

TICK CHECK

An X marks the spot
Where a grape with teeth
Sucks up a black hole
In a Honey Bucket

Sucks off a campsite in a sleeping bag

Jumps from one cool blade of grass to another cool blade of grass

A living freckle
That knows your name and knows
That it is spring and feels a kind of imaginary privacy

Touched beneath your socks

Touched beneath the elastic in your waistband

Check
Behind your elbows
Check behind your knees

They don't sing

They walk right in
You notice you are more than one and then there they are

A period at the end of a long sentence

Teeth marks from a black sewing machine

Mom's eyelashes

Brush it
Brush it
Brush it

The sprinklers play Bach partitas in the driveway between parked cars and abandoned Big Wheels

I can feel a little pinch every once in a while

Inside they are full of other people's blood and the evening breeze and wakefulness

They seem to weigh nothing at all

—Michael Dickman

She dashed the marble to the cloud floor, and it shattered. Then she got scared. "Oh, shit, was I supposed to keep that?"

A little worker with a broom came by and swept it up.

"I don't think I was supposed to do that," she said to the little worker. "But that wasn't the image I was hoping to receive in the afterlife. He was just some guy I danced with and really wanted to fuck. And I mean *really*."

The little worker, who had long white whiskers like a cat, kept going with his pan and broom.

Then, almost before she knew it, Pier was there.

"Did you die?" she asked him, confused.

"Yeah, did you?"

"Yeah."

They looked at each other, bewildered. They really hadn't seen each other for more than a few hours in life, and they looked to each other the way they had looked the night they met at the party. They were even wearing the same clothes. Presumably, this was it: eternity.

"Were you married or something?" she asked him.

"Yes, to Lila. Were you?"

"Well, eventually. We didn't have a wedding—but basically. You didn't love me more than you loved Lila, did you?"

"No," he said. "But I wanted to have sex with you more than I wanted to have sex with Lila."

"Yeah, I really wanted to have sex with you, too."

"So are we in Heaven with each other because we didn't?"

"That doesn't make sense," she said. "I don't need to have sex with you anymore. I don't even think I want to. I miss Roy."

"I miss Lila."

"So then are we in Hell? Are we being punished for lusting after each other?"

"I guess so," he said.

They stood there awkwardly for a few minutes, or maybe it was a few years.

"Should we try having sex?" he asked.

"I guess so," she said.

So then they did it. And it was pretty incredible—pretty incredible for a first time.

"Huh," she said.

"Yeah, this is pretty weird," he said.

"I really felt we were destined to meet—on New Year's, when we met. I went away with that feeling."

"I guess we were, if here we are."

"This is so stupid," she said, looking around, as if someone were standing by with a clipboard or something, waiting to take them on to the next thing, or to explain this to them.

"I mean, we can't be the only ones in this situation," he said.

She sat down on a cloud. "Let me think," she said, but it was as it had been in life—whenever she declared she was going to think, she suddenly felt completely unable to think. In this case, however, it was probably that there was too much to think about, as all of this was beyond her comprehension and experience. She was like a newborn, there in the afterlife, newly born into the afterlife, not yet knowing what anything meant, just as when she had been born into her earthly existence, it had taken her years just to be able to identify oatmeal. She suddenly felt hopeless. As a baby, you didn't know that you didn't know, but here in the afterlife, with your memory of your earthly life, you *did* know that you didn't know. She understood that she was in a new dimension, with probably all new rules and meanings.

"I just can't figure it out," she said.

"Maybe God didn't want us cheating on our partners—"

"Yeah, maybe God wanted us to be with our earthly partners, so he kept us separate until now. They were for earth, and you and me—we're for Heaven?"

He threw up his hands.

So they tried having sex again. It was astonishing, completely mind-blowing, actually, but it was not surrounded by earthly life. It just kind of happened in the middle of nothingness, which—it turns out—isn't that erotic. Even if it felt great, and there was that energy and knowing between them, something was lacking. Sex here wasn't a distraction from the toil of everyday life. And there was no one to tell about it. Some heart of mystery was gone from it. It was like God, in all his wisdom, didn't really understand what one wanted from sex. It was its embeddedness in life that gave it its deep pleasure and

meaning. It was hard to explain. It was hard to explain why isolating it from everything else basically drained it of its point. Its point was that—in that moment—everything else *wasn't* being done, but sex *was!* That it had triumphed over *everything else*. But, with nothing else, there was no triumph in it, and, without the triumph, sex had no point.

"I'm really glad I got to see you again, though," she said, hoping to leave Pier now and go on to whatever else eternity had in store. But she couldn't go. There was nowhere to go. And when Pier tried to walk away somehow the laws of the place had him walking back toward her.

"So then is this Hell?" Pier asked her. "No offense. But is this our *punishment*?"

"I don't think so," she said. But she wasn't sure. Had she done something wrong in wanting Pier? Should she not have listened to that song so many times? Did it just take the soul some time to adapt to the pleasures of eternity? Was she too fresh to appreciate or understand its pleasures, and what was so great about being here with him now? She *had* really wanted to fuck him—more than any guy she'd ever met. And now she could for eternity. So? What exactly was her complaint?

I want to not have the things I want, she realized, for her mind was still working the way it worked on earth. *I want the things I want to be just beyond my reach—just beyond my fingertips. That is happiness for me. Huh!* It was so simple. Suddenly, she understood everything about her earthly life.

"I'm the same," he said. "That's how I was, too."

"That's why we liked each other—what we saw in each other."

"Yeah."

She hoped, now that she got it, that something would change. But they remained there. As if the point of Heaven wasn't to *understand* things, the way it had been the point of earth. Indeed, her new understanding suddenly floated away, and she could barely remember the understanding she'd come to. But Pier was still there in front of her, clothed like he'd been that New Year's Eve. She thought, *I should just lick my tongue all the way up his neck, take off his shirt, pull off my dress, draw his cock into my mouth, and suck on it, then when I'm done sucking on it, I should turn around, let him take me from behind, just throw my head back, hope he yanks my hair* . . . and so on. Despite the lack of context, she started to get wet and her skin flushed and she looked at him and gave him a little smile, and he gave her this little smile back, and then they were close, him touching her shoulders and kissing her slowly on the mouth, his hips and cock grinding into her, for they still had their clothes on, it was just like being thirteen, "dry humping" they had called it, back when they lived in time. It was amazing—this "asshole" was touching her breast so beautifully, she drew her fingers through his beautiful floppy hair and they collapsed on the cloud and she was on top of him, then she stopped and looked down at him and he smiled up at her the same smile he'd smiled when they were dancing, like, *Fuck—I can't believe it's YOU*, and she thought, *But who AM I*? And they laughed, and he started pulling off his belt, and she sat back beside him to watch him do it: she loved watching a man pull off his belt, she always had, there was just something about it, it was so sexy, so private, so manly, so much like a movie, and with just this hint of violence or punishment, but also he was just undoing his belt, but what was below his belt, oh was there ever an article of clothing in the history of humanity more enticing than bluejeans on a guy with a big pressing cock underneath, pressing hard against it, and that bronze metal zipper that you got to pull down, and then the whitest underwear underneath, how good a hard cock felt beneath soft white underwear . . . and yeah, it really wasn't so bad to be here, she was getting into it, it was so hot, her friends had *hated* this guy, and she smiled to remember this. Weren't most of those friends *dead*? Yeah! How come in life you could never remember that all those people around you would be dead, when it was the only truth worth remembering? *This* one would be dead, and *this* one would be dead, and *this* one would be dead, too—all the delight one could have felt if one only had the courage to remember this! And here was Pier—dead! And she, too—also dead! And it was *fine!* At last! At last they could fuck!

Pier had been like the box of maxi pads, waiting in her drawer, ridiculously there for *so long* so that whenever she opened the drawer, she would see it and think the day would never come when she would start bleeding like her friends. Would it ever happen EVER? Pier had also been a hope, there in the drawer, pushed to the very back of it, and whenever, over the years, she caught sight of it she would doubt the day would ever come. But she had been the one to tuck it in there. And she *had* eventually gotten her period, and now she had Pier, and they could touch!

The important thing about lust is to wait, she thought. *It's the thing lust needs: waiting. It actually makes it better—all along, and in the end.*

Pier heard her thought. "How brilliant we were to have waited."

"No one ever waited more patiently for something they wanted more."

He smiled at her. They were heroes of lust. Here in the clouds. As space penetrates time, and time, rock-hard, penetrates space.

What had given them the strength to wait? "Goodness," they agreed. "We were so good." But what had given them goodness? Or was it *not* goodness, in fact, but the knowledge that the sensation of lust would always be superior to whatever lust was pointing to? Was *that* what had bound them, and no one else? God had put that fifteen-year-old dick in her hand, and she had learned from it. Only up here, here in Heaven, could sex be better than the wanting of it could be.

The little worker with the broom came by, passed them, moved right along.

"We can do this for eternity," Pier said.

"Yes," she smiled.

"What happens when Roy and Lila die?"

She shrugged; she didn't know. "I don't even know what sex is," she said.

Then she heard God again. "No one knows." ♦

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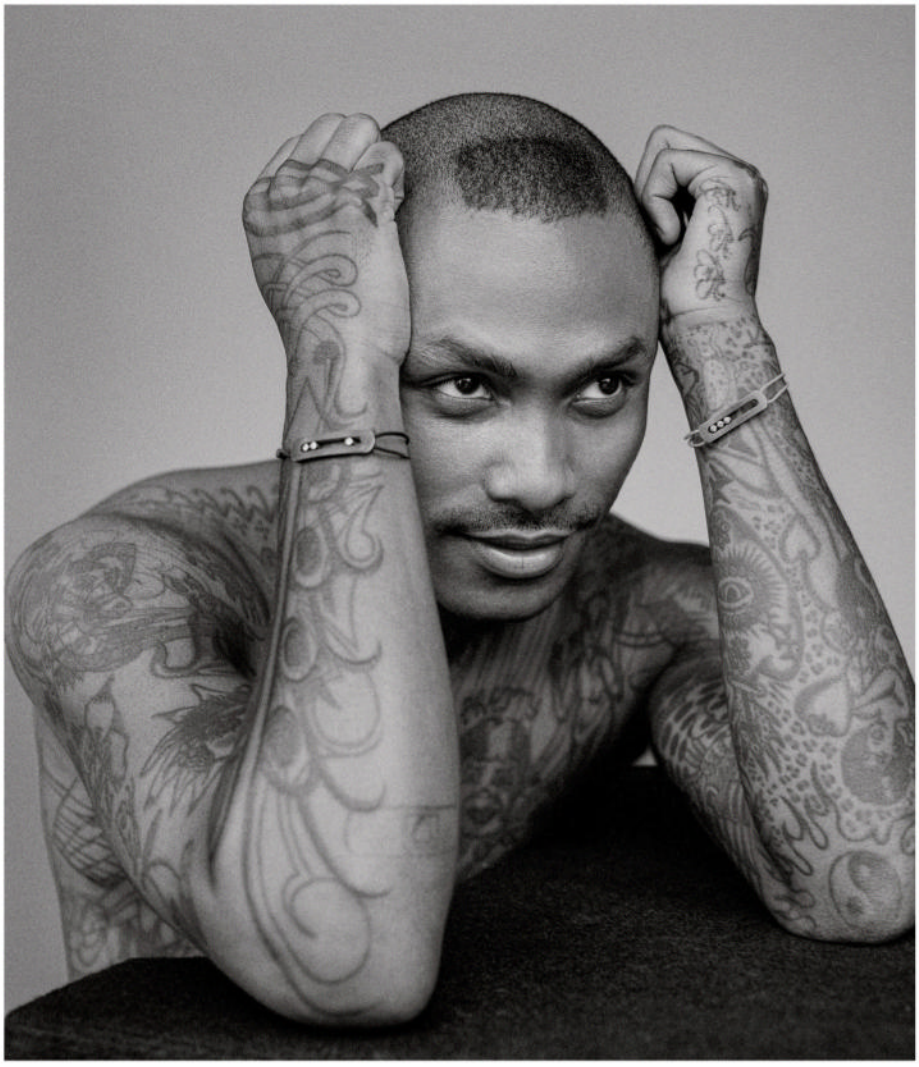


POP MUSIC

MODERN LOVE

Steve Lacy's idiosyncratic, unguarded R. & B.

BY AMANDA PETRUSICH

In the summer of 2022, Steve Lacy's "Bad Habit," a buoyant but doleful song about a missed shot—"I bite my tongue, it's a bad habit," he sings ruefully—started going crazy on TikTok. Lacy, who was twenty-four at the time, was previously best known as a guitarist in the Internet, a psych-R. & B. band that emerged out of the sprawling Los Angeles hip-hop group Odd Future. "Bad Habit" was an unexpected but delightful hit. That fall, the track was nominated for three Grammys, including Song of the Year, and spent thirty-five weeks on the Hot 100, including three at No. 1. Interestingly, "Bad Habit" was also the first single ever to top five of *Billboard's* genre charts (including R. & B./Hip-Hop and Rock & Alternative), which speaks to the odd elasticity of Lacy's sound. A song such as "Bad Habit" can perhaps exist only now, in an era in which every piece of music is available on an endless lateral plane—a time in which genre, as an organizing principle, has largely fossilized.

Earlier this month, Lacy released

Lacy's new album, "Oh Yeah?," marries the analog charms of nineties R. & B. with the disaffection of a life lived online.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL BAILEY-GATES

his third LP, "Oh Yeah?," a gorgeous, deeply humane record. Lacy has matured as a songwriter: "Oh Yeah?" is rhythmically expansive, and its lyrics are feverish, incriminating. His style, though, is still idiosyncratic—a particular mix of bedroom melancholy and broadband corruption. The new songs effectively marry the immediacy and offline charm of early-nineties R. & B. (Babyface, TLC) with the disaffection of life lived through a screen.

I recently met Lacy in the lobby of a hotel on the edge of New York's Chinatown. It was a steamy, fluorescent afternoon; we carried our iced coffees to Seward Park, finding an empty bench in the shade. Lacy's best songs combine elements of psychedelia, hip-hop, and alternative R. & B. (a genre developed and perfected, in the early twenty-tens, by artists such as Frank Ocean, SZA, and the Weeknd). Some parts of "Oh Yeah?" seem to take inspiration from indie rock (Weezer, Dirty Projectors, occasionally Beck), whereas others skew more experimental (Sun Ra, Parliament-Funkadelic). Substantive verses are new terrain for Lacy, who, as a younger writer, worried more about hooks and beats. " 'Verses? Who cares!' That was my vibe when I first started," Lacy said. But, on this record, "I was kind of mopey until I got a good verse. And then I was FaceTiming everyone: 'Look at this! I said this!' "

Lately, Lacy has been listening to a lot of Moondog, the avant-garde composer known to mid-century New Yorkers as the Viking of Sixth Avenue. (Beginning in the nineteen-forties, Moondog, who was born Louis Hardin, could be found on the streets of Manhattan sporting a horned helmet and a voluminous gray beard, playing an array of bespoke instruments.) "Moondog is not playing chords," Lacy said. "Where I come from, it's super chords—the flat-9, the flat-5." Before "Bad Habit" took off—and before Lacy turned twenty-one—he was already finding considerable success as a producer, having worked with Kendrick Lamar, Solange, Mac Miller, and Vampire Weekend. Lacy made the beat for "PRIDE.," a dreamy, spectral cut from "DAMN."—Lamar's Pulitzer Prize-winning, triple-platinum album from 2017—using his cracked iPhone 6, an iRig adapter, and the GarageBand app. "I'm, like, 'Am I gonna be the artist, or am I gonna be the artist that inspires other artists?' Everybody took it," he said of his style. "I gave it away, actually. Chorus, guitar, R. & B. drums." Now he's been trying to "flip my process on its head." Lacy pointed to "The Feeling," a soulful, wavy new song about submitting to passion. "Chords don't happen until the acoustic guitar on the chorus. Then it fades in, and you're, like, Whoa, where'd the fuck that come from? Those little nerdy things excite me."

In conversation, Lacy is charismatic, funny, and frank. He has 3.6 million followers on Instagram, where he posts often, and in a manner that calls back to an earlier, less mercenary version of the app: selfies, memes, pictures of his feet in socks and slides. Lyrically, "Oh Yeah?" is surprisingly raw and openhearted. It's especially vulnerable when it comes to depictions of sex and yearning. After a brief moment of consideration—"I don't want to cook myself," he said, laughing—Lacy described himself as "single-ish." He sings frequently about the utter impossibility of modern romance. "I think I'm in love with you / I think you should be in love with me / Bad boy, what you gonna do? / 'Cause everybody got someone but me," Lacy pines on the chorus of "Show You Me," a new song built around a folky guitar riff and a bleating synthesizer. Lacy is queer, and he dates people of various gender identities. During a verse on "Show You Me," he admits, "Been a while since I had some coochie stuck in my teeth."

Lacy described "Oh Yeah?" as an exploration of the various ways in which he might be "underdeveloped as a human," mostly because he has been so focussed on becoming a musician. (In 2016, when the Internet's third record, "Ego Death," was nominated for a Grammy, Lacy had to get up the morning after the ceremony and go to high school.) Much like "Gemini Rights," Lacy's previous album, "Oh Yeah?" is tangentially concerned with the fallout of one specific romantic relationship—"a heartbreak that happened to me six years ago," Lacy said—and the grab bag of obsessive things that we do in the aftermath of loss. Lacy pointed to "Nice Shoes / In Your World," a pounding, frenetic song about trying to outrun your own desire. "My dick is getting hard again / At the thought of you and me holding hands," he sings. Lacy's voice is nasal and occasionally a little wonky, which gives it unusual warmth. He wants his work to feel like a benevolent companion. "I look for this underlying feeling of a hand on my thigh, like—isn't being human fucking weird for all of us?" Lacy said.

Mostly "Oh Yeah?" is about the sensation of coming to—of having weathered the tumult of love and maybe learned a couple of things. "This album sounds like post-nut clarity," Lacy joked. Sometimes, in those tender, postcoital minutes, we are exceptionally awake to our shortcomings and fears. "You know when you've been on a wild bender or whatever? You've had the moment, everyone is gone, and then . . . those thoughts," he said. "That's what my album is like."

Lacy grew up in Compton—he has the city's name tattooed on the right side of his chest—with his mother and three sisters. He described his childhood as happy, although, he said, "I didn't know what rich was. I thought rich was anyone who had two bathrooms in their house, and stairs." He continued, "We had fun. I guess there was gang stuff. But you know what? There's gangs that be happenin' in all neighborhoods." On the first verse of "Is It Cool?," which features a velvety, searching outro from SZA, he sings about the early death of his father:

> Never needed a man
> Tatay died when I was like ten
> I turned out to be just fine
> I just cheat every now and again

"There's this whole thing of cheaters being fuckboys, but that's actually a deep, deep, deep insecurity of the soul," he said. I wondered if that verse was somehow in conversation with a line from "Nice Shoes"—"Crazy how you can be sad and not notice"—though I told Lacy I understood if he didn't want to talk about his father's death, or how grief has shaped him. "It's a beautiful thing to talk about, actually," he said. "It's also a weird thing, because there is no sadness to be felt. My father was pretty occasional. I'd see him on holidays and stuff. But I never saw my parents be romantic or anything." Lacy's father was an immigrant from the Philippines who worked as a carpenter. "He

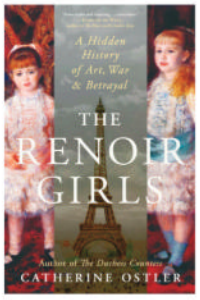
wanted his green card, so they made it happen. My big sister remembers coming home, and they were just married. You don't really expect two people like that to be together. I can show you." Lacy pulled up an old photograph of his parents standing together. His mother is young and beaming. His father looks significantly older, his expression staid. "Isn't that insane? They are *a* pairing, but I'm, like—this is so funny, that this made me," Lacy said. "I grew up a Black American. Filipino? Forget about it. But it's in me."

He's planning to play a show in the Philippines on his next tour, and he's been attempting to gather more information about his paternal lineage. "When you're that young, you don't know what death means," he said. "I'm learning that there is a hole. It does go back to that line—it's crazy that you can be sad and not notice! There's a lot that I just kind of bypass, because I didn't know how to process those emotions as a kid."

Later that day, over dinner—"I'm on my Lenny Kravitz shit," Lacy said, forgoing pasta for salad—I asked how he was managing the vagaries of fame. "I want to give it a fair shot," he said of his career. "But I'm not necessarily trying to do anything that will damage my humanity." I told him that I admired how unmediated "Oh Yeah?" feels—in a cultural moment defined by curation, filters, artificial intelligence, optimization, and perpetual performance, his songs are goofy, profound, and unguarded. "It's actually very scary," he said. "I was building this relationship with the work, and I thought, It's just us, our intimate thing. Now it's, like, Oh, shit, right—I have to share this." He'd spent the previous few days attempting to sort out elements of the album's visual presentation. "Beats me, you know?" he said. "I'm such a musician. I make these things to play them."

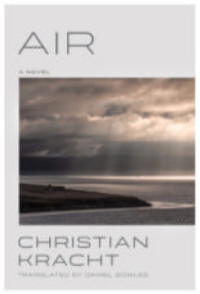
Still, Lacy, who is prone to philosophizing (at one point, he jokingly wondered if he might be a wizard), was clinging to some sense that the universe will do right by him—that, ultimately, it does right by all of us. "I do believe in that higher power—that everything is already written, and these are lessons for me, even if they kind of suck right now." He laughed. "I hate a bright-side motherfucker, too. But I do believe in that." ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED

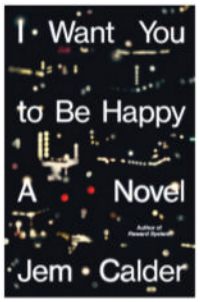


The Renoir Girls, *by Catherine Ostler (Atria)*. This sweeping biography of the daughters of a French Jewish banking dynasty—who were painted by Renoir, and counted Proust as a family friend—unfolds in parallel worlds: a glittering Paris of privilege, and a Paris where widespread poverty and political instability fuelled profound social anxiety. Ostler traces a thread of anti-Jewish hatred through both worlds, as she illustrates how the sisters' rarefied existence was frequently marred by bursts of prejudice. In 1882, shortly after completing the girls' portraits, for instance, Renoir declared that he was "washing my hands of the Jews." As Ostler shows, his stated reasons were vague and irrelevant. Renoir was merely a "cork in the current" of antisemitism.

Little Blue Dot, *by Katherine Dunn (Bloomsbury)*. Dunn's thoroughly engaging history of the Global Positioning System opens in the early years of the Second World War, with the discovery that the Germans were using radio waves to bomb targets sight unseen. The British response—attempting to manipulate the Germans' system while developing a more sophisticated one of their own—sets the stage for the technological arms race that would eventually produce G.P.S. and its rivals. As Dunn follows that race through the decades, she explores the physics behind G.P.S., and its strange duality: if the technology is now an almost invisible feature of civilian life, it also remains a "military product, one designed to drop enormously powerful bombs with staggering precision."



Air, *by Christian Kracht, translated from the German by Daniel Bowles (Liveright)*. Two story lines anchor this novel: one centered on a present-day designer with a Luddism-inflected aesthetic, and one that takes place in a fantastical realm where a young girl accidentally shoots a man she has mistaken for a deer. In the first plot, the designer disappears during a solar storm while working on a project in Norway. In the second, the girl and the man run from soldiers sent by a malevolent ruler. In that reality, people live on what they forage and kill; they wear shared clothes; they don't have inventions like mirrors or—crucially—antibiotics. Though this world lacks the twenty-first-century trappings that so bothered the designer, its brutalities also suggest that nostalgia for the pre-modern is a knife that cuts both ways.



I Want You to Be Happy, *by Jem Calder (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. "A new person finding you interesting makes you feel new." So reflects one of the protagonists of this intimate novel, which follows the relationship between two creative aspirants in London—a young woman working as a barista while nursing dreams of poetry, and a slightly older man who is a copywriter, but hopes to become a novelist. The two meet at a bar one night, then go home together. As Calder tracks the course of their romance, from the careful texting of its early days to reckonings with the characters' darker elements—the copywriter, it emerges, drinks excessively—he gives the perennial human features of self-sabotage and solipsism a fresh look.

A MAP OF THE STARS

The men who made theory French.

BY DAYNA TORTORICI

Picture an innocent: a corn-fed girl from a landlocked American suburb who loves more than anything to read. She heads east for college, eager to slough off her upbringing, and on arrival she drifts toward the literature department, or maybe art history. She signs up for a 200-level course with a promising but bewildering name—something with "and/as" in the title, perhaps—and welcomes the difficulty it suggests, difficulty being what she came for. But still she's unprepared for what's coming, because it is the nineteen-eighties, or the nineties, or the two-thousands, and, as one supercilious male classmate is all too eager to tell her, everything she's ever thought about art and reading is wrong. The author is dead, at best an author function. Meaning is contingent, words not to be trusted. A book is not a book but a text, and every text is at bottom a proof of the inefficacy of language. Enlightenment rationality was a fiction; only deconstruction remains. Our poor, befuddled heroine! She is not in Indiana anymore.

This scene—of a young American woman's first encounter with French theory, the body of thought otherwise known as structuralism and post-structuralism—has by now been fictionalized several times over. In realist novels by members of what the critic Nicholas Dames called the "theory generation," our heroine rarely takes kindly to theory. She may be distraught by it, like Katie Armstrong in Zadie Smith's "On Beauty," who listens mutely as her classmates "interrogate" a Rembrandt etching so moving it made her cry. She may be stunned by it, like Tassie Keltjin in Lorrie Moore's "A Gate at the Stairs," who blinks like a cave dweller blinded by sunlight when her professor speaks "thrillingly of Henry James's masturbation of the comma." Or she may follow along but object to theory's obscurities, like Madeleine Hanna in Jeffrey Eugenides's "The Marriage Plot." What she never does, though, is fall for theory. Full immersion is reserved for less sympathetic characters. Rich kids in Doc Martens, nihilists with shaved eyebrows, the know-it-all daughters of East Coast academics: these are the types who pledge their fidelity to theory by spouting its abstruse terminology, often to comic effect. "Considering how Thurston's always going on about how much he *worships* language, you'd think he wouldn't parrot so much jargon," Madeleine quips in "The Marriage Plot." "He used the word *phallus* three times today."

The cross-examination of an art work as if it were a political enemy; the hauteur of the student who "gets" the reading and the bafflement of the one who does not; the jargon, the outfits, the aura of cultishness—it's all familiar to former students of theory. And if these novelists seem suspicious toward theory, it's hard to begrudge them too much, given the way that theory was taught in American classrooms. As the sociologist Michèle Lamont wrote in 1987, "American undergraduate students in literary criticism currently discuss the logocentrism of the philosophical tradition without having read a single classic of philosophy." By the late two-thousands, when I was in college, it was worse: literature students hardly knew what those classics of philosophy were. That did not stop us from reading the way theory trained us to, reaching beyond the surface meaning of a text to "unmask" its repressed Other. Nor did it stop us from feeling as if we were not merely reading but *doing* something—maybe even something political.

It was an exciting illusion. We were

"The Frenchmen" is part memoir, part biography, part philosophy primer.

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ILLUSTRATION BY ALEX MERTO

writing term papers, not upsetting the world order with our Althusserian readings of Jane Austen. But theory itself—was that an illusion? Were those of us who felt changed by it, who used the word "phallus" three times in seminar to the annoyance of our classmates, deluding ourselves when we saw in Lacan's tortured syntax and Foucault's forceful style a new way of comprehending the world? Was theory—as critics on the right and the left contended—kind of bullshit?

Emily Eakin's "The Frenchmen: Or, My Life in Theory" (Penguin Press) argues persuasively that it wasn't. Eakin is a senior editor at the *Times Book Review* (and previously an editor at this magazine) who, like her fictional counterparts, hails from the Midwest. Unlike them, she fell hard for theory. As a sophomore at Harvard—not the hottest hotbed of deconstruction in the Ivy League (that would be Yale) but close—she became a literature concentrator, as theory students were known. Soon, she was copying passages from Derrida into her journal. "Theory was cool," Eakin recalls. "Theory was French. Theory was also, strange though it might sound, sexy. . . . There was a libidinal rush at seeing reality, language, the human psyche, pried open and ripped apart."

At last, representation for the theory-pilled girl! Part memoir, part biography, part philosophy primer, "The Frenchmen" interleaves Eakin's bildungsroman with careful close readings and details of her subjects' lives. Lacan, Althusser, Barthes, Foucault, Deleuze, Guattari, Derrida, and de Man are all present as mononymic embodiments of their thought. But they are also present as themselves—as Jacques, Louis, Roland, Michel, Gilles, Félix, Jacques, and Paul. (This last one is not technically a Frenchman, Eakin concedes, "but a French-speaking Belgian who taught in the French department at Yale.") Along the way, Eakin introduces their intellectual forefathers, Jean-Paul Sartre and Claude Lévi-Strauss, and, at the edges, even some women: Simone de Beauvoir, Simone Weil, Luce Irigaray. For those of us who learned to see French theorists as stars in a void, as discrete but brilliant points of light, reading "The Frenchmen" feels like being handed a map of the constellations. All sorts of hitherto obscured connections are illuminated.

Theory emerged from the hothouse intellectual climate of postwar Paris. In the fifties, the dominant philosophical movement in France was existentialism, which, with its humanist ethos and its emphasis on the freely choosing individual, offered a generation shattered by the Second World War a way to talk about meaning in a world rendered meaningless by its horrors. But, to a nascent cohort of French philosophers, existentialism was increasingly passé—a naïve relic of "Descartes and the Enlightenment, of an obsolete, romantic past," Eakin writes. (In Lévi-Strauss's 1955 memoir, "Tristes Tropiques," he called existentialism "a sort of shop-girl metaphysics.") By the media-saturated, technologically advancing sixties, it seemed that systems, not individuals, were the forces governing reality.

Where existentialists saw man condemned to freedom, the so-called structuralists saw man constrained by an "impersonal regime of the system and the subject," Eakin writes. Some of these systems were political and social, like the state and the family. Some were conceptual, like "madness" and "reason." The elemental structure that determined all the others was language. Knowledge was not possible without language, the structuralists argued; everything we knew about the world was filtered through language's scrim and shaped by its architecture. A precise understanding of structure required a scientific understanding of language, and for that structuralist philosophers turned to linguistics.

Eakin writes that her aim in "The Frenchmen" was to "re-embody" the theorists, "to recover the hidden human element beneath their often stringent antihumanism." The human element proves useful to her reconstruction of how theory came to be. Former theory students may recall learning the basics of structural linguistics as first proposed by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure: that every sign—a word that points to an object in the world—is made up of two components, the sound-image of the word as spoken or written (the signifier) and the mental concept to which it refers (the signified). They may recall that there is no inherent bond between signifier and signified, that their linkage is a matter of convention, and that signifier and signified are meaningful only in relation to each other and to the system as a whole. But they may not recall *why* they learned this, or know how linguistics became essential to theory to begin with.

As Eakin's biographical narrative reveals, it came down to chance encounters. The first was in 1942, when Lévi-Strauss was living in New York. He was searching for a method that would help him systematize the vast corpus of ethnographic literature he'd found in the New York Public Library when he was introduced to the Russian linguist Roman Jakobson. Jakobson gave the anthropologist a crash course in linguistics, and Lévi-Strauss, Eakin writes, was "dazzled." Saussure's argument that language was not a referential system but a relational one rhymed with his hunch that human social organization was determined not by biological imperatives but by unconscious relational structures. "Although they belong to *another order of reality*," he went on to say, "kinship phenomena are *of the same type* as linguistic phenomena." They, too, operated according to a universal logic that could be decoded and mapped.

In 1949, Lévi-Strauss met the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan at a dinner party and soon introduced him to Jakobson. Saussure's theories were a revelation for Lacan, too; he would later work a "lexicon of grids, rules, signifiers, and signs" into his popular lectures at Sainte-Anne Hospital, in Paris. Freud had grounded his theories of sexuality and the psyche in biology. Lacan revised psychoanalysis by rooting it in linguistics, claiming that "the unconscious is structured like a language." The Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, who attended Lacan's lectures, saw what Lacan was doing for Freud—boiling his writings down to their first principles—and hoped to do the same for Marx.

Althusser's embrace of Lacan partly inspired his reading of Marx as the first scientist of history. As the philosophy *caïman* (essentially an undergraduate adviser) at the École Normale Supérieure—arguably France's most prestigious institution of higher education—Althusser also exposed generations of students to Lacan's thought by inviting him to move

"To think that we could all avoid having to stand if the guy at the front just took a seat."

• •

his lectures from Sainte-Anne to the École Normale in 1964. Traces of psychoanalysis can be detected in Althusser's arguments that "ideology is acting on us and through us all the time," as Eakin puts it, "even inside our heads, within our unconscious." Michel Foucault, who was Althusser's student at the École Normale, also linked repression within to repression without, turning his attention to the normalizing forces of the state: faceless institutions such as asylums and prisons.

Post-structuralism—theory's second wave—alternately challenged and deepened the structuralist tendency. Roland Barthes's early work was modelled on Lévi-Strauss's, but by the sixties Barthes had abandoned the taxonomies of structuralism for the pleasures of open-ended interpretive possibility. Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze's "Anti-Oedipus," from 1972, rejected the static "daddy-mommy-me" triangle of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis and argued that the unconscious was a site of exuberant creativity. Jacques Derrida, a student of Althusser and Foucault, developed deconstruction, a technique of "textual unravelment" which he used to reveal inconsistencies and gaps in the structuralists' work. In 1966, Derrida attended a Johns Hopkins conference often cited as theory's American début. There, he met and befriended Paul de Man, who would become deconstruction's second most influential practitioner.

Though Eakin's account of this intellectual lineage is impressively lucid, it is not always chronological, and its episodes can be hard to situate in time. The book's short chapters have the feeling of notecards shuffled in search of an optimal sequence. Readers will find themselves introduced to the publication of Derrida's "Of Grammatology" on three separate occasions. Yet one would be hard pressed to identify an order, or a structure, better suited to Eakin's project, which tasks itself with explaining the work of no fewer than eight famously difficult thinkers while maintaining narrative cohesion.

Besides, for the gift of biographical detail, all is forgiven. Some readers will be familiar with the headlines of the Frenchmen's life stories, which are often depressing. De Man was a bigamist, a con man, and a Nazi collaborator. Althusser strangled his wife, in what appears to have been a dissociative psychotic episode. Barthes died after being hit by a laundry van. Foucault, who frequented San Francisco's leather bars, was rumored to have knowingly caught or transmitted H.I.V. at a bathhouse.

But Eakin's reëmbodiment project also yields lesser-known facts, prosaic delights that Barthes might call "punctums." Lacan was a "dandy and a seducer," a lavish dresser scared of aging who held a "special interest" in mirrors all his life. Describing his wardrobe, Eakin writes, "He wore a shirt the color of cotton candy, a velvet-and-silk striped jacket, a black mink coat." (Together or separately? Alas, Eakin doesn't specify.) Deleuze also dressed sharp—his wife worked for Balmain—and he kept his fingernails unusually long. Foucault had a white Jaguar that he loved to drive fast. Lacan—another speed demon—once terrified the German philosopher Martin Heidegger's wife with his driving. In 1958, Sartre wrote "the initial script (ultimately abandoned) for a John Huston biopic about Freud." While in grad school, de Man was the private French tutor to a young Henry Kissinger.

Eakin's biographical approach allows her to draw connections that a more straightforward intellectual history might not. Take the influence of Lacan, which she maps across the lives of at least ten of his contemporaries. Five of his fellow-Frenchmen attended Lacan's lectures at Sainte-Anne or at the École Normale, and two saw him for analysis—Barthes briefly and Guattari for years. ("For an additional fee," Eakin writes, "Lacan sometimes allowed Guattari to drive him home, explaining that the experience was 'part of the analysis.'") After an injection of mescaline in 1935 left him with persistent visions of crabs, Sartre sought treatment with Lacan, then an unknown thirty-four-year-old in his first year of private practice. They concluded that his problem was a "fear of becoming alone," Sartre later remembered, and the crabs went away on their own.

This approach also calls attention to the centrality of institutions in the Frenchmen's personal lives—the prisons, asylums, hospitals, and schools that shaped them. Both Sartre and Althusser were prisoners of war in the forties, and both found their time in confinement salutary. The anxiety Sartre felt upon his return to Paris after his imprisonment provided the existential insight that freedom is in fact terrifying. Althusser likewise seemed to prefer the regimented life of the camp. It was there that he was introduced to Marxism, by another P.O.W., and the revelation of it changed him forever.

In less happy times, Althusser, who suffered from bipolar disorder, was institutionalized at Sainte-Anne. After one bout of depression, he received an alarming twenty-four electroshock treatments. Foucault was taken to Sainte-Anne by his father for an evaluation after a suicide attempt during his second year at the École Normale. Later, he brought his psychology students there to observe patients.

Guattari spent time in hospitals as a student and an analyst. Barthes had tuberculosis and "spent most of World War II in sanatoriums," where, Eakin writes, "he was subjected to therapies that sound

nearly as terrible as his illness." Quoting Barthes's biographer Tiphaine Samoyault, Eakin describes a three-month "reclining cure" that required Barthes to "lie at an angle to the horizontal for eighteen hours out of twenty-four, his lower limbs raised above the level of his thorax and his head, which made it difficult even to read." Deleuze, another TB patient, had a lung removed in 1968.

But perhaps no institution loomed larger for the Frenchmen than school, where they spent much of their lives. Nearly all of them recalled their admissions and certification exams, known as the *concours* and the *agrégation*, as formative and terrifying ordeals. Derrida failed the *concours* twice before getting into the École Normale; Deleuze never passed, attending the Sorbonne instead. Lévi-Strauss spent hours before his *agrégation* violently ill from a drug a family friend gave him for his nerves. ("Morphine? Cocaine?" Eakin writes. "He never knew what, exactly.") It's a suggestive fact that Barthes, the most buoyant of the bunch, was functionally barred from attending the École Normale, owing to his TB. Perhaps the reclining cure, however unpleasant, was still less punishing than the École.

Eakin describes Derrida's two years as a boarding student in a preparatory class for the *concours* as a nightmarish blend of prison, school, and sanitarium, replete with gray uniforms, barracks-like dorms, cold showers, and small, disgusting rations. According to his biographer Benoît Peeters, Derrida was "on the verge of succumbing" to madness there. But by then his most traumatic memory of school had already occurred: in 1942, at twelve years old, Derrida, who grew up in Algeria, was expelled from his school for being Jewish, and wasn't allowed to return until after Algiers was liberated by the Allies. "The wound was of another order," Derrida said, "and it never healed."

These institutional experiences left their mark on the Frenchmen's work. Eakin finds traces of them in Althusser's repeated insistence that, as she puts it, "human subjects are not in charge of their actions or even their thoughts." They're visible in Foucault's writing on the normalizing function of institutions, and in Deleuze and Guattari's on schizophrenia. And they're visible, she suggests, in Derrida's preoccupation with binary pairs, such as inside/outside or center/margin, and in the attention he paid to their non-privileged terms.

They also suggest one reason for theory's enduring appeal to college students: like many of the Frenchmen, most of them have never not been in school. The forces of normalization, containment, repression, and evaluation are constants in their lives. As far as they are aware—as far as they've experienced—there really is no outside. The picture presented by theory reflects the world that they know.

After college, Eakin got a master's in comparative literature at the École Normale and started a Ph.D. program in English, but she dropped out partway through. She had "overdosed on theory," she writes, and fled academia for journalism. In May, 1996, shortly after she joined the staff of *Lingua Franca*, a little magazine about academic life, it published a bombshell story by a physics professor at N.Y.U. named Alan Sokal. Sokal had submitted a satirical paper larded with jargon to the philosophy journal *Social Text*, which it accepted. When he revealed the prank, which became known as the Sokal hoax, critics of theory were giddy. The episode seemed to crystallize a broader turn away from theory, a growing consensus that it was pure chicanery.

Derrida, the last of the surviving Frenchmen, died, of pancreatic cancer, in 2004. Eakin was working at the *Times*, and an editor at the foreign desk asked her to look over Derrida's obituary before it went to press. It struck her as a caricature of deconstruction, but "it seemed pointless, maybe even pretentious, to object," Eakin recalls. She told the editor the obit was fine, and the paper ran it as it was, under the headline "JACQUES DERRIDA, ABSTRUSE THEORIST, DIES IN PARIS AT 74." The resulting public outrage—more than three hundred prominent scholars and artists signed a letter in protest—felt like a sign that she had tipped too far in the direction of anti-intellectualism.

It's tempting to read "The Frenchmen" as atonement for her betrayal—as penance for letting "ABSTRUSE THEORIST DIES" be Derrida's epitaph in the paper of record. But the book is also a reconciliation longer in the making, an attempt by Eakin to broker peace between the theory of her youth and her adult profession. Inevitably, her efforts to translate theory into the language of journalism have their weak points. ("It's the nature of simplification to be simple," says the eyebrowless Thurston, in "The Marriage Plot.") But her fidelity to the ideas is admirable, and the effort behind her patient explanations of, say, Derrida's *différance* is moving. Theory may not have taught Eakin to live with ease, but it did teach her "a new way to think," and its critical lessons have endured: "Be skeptical. Be alert. Pay very close attention. Beware political claims posing as timeless truths. Notice arguments that seem to boil down to this versus that, us versus them—neat binaries in which one term is championed at the expense of the other."

And yet, because all bildungsromans must culminate in adulthood, Eakin's move away from the specialized jargon of theory and toward journalistic plain-spokenness is framed as a sign of her maturity. The cliché grates a bit. Must we think and write more like children in order to become adults? The book's appeals to reader-friendliness can feel pandering: the bite-size chapters with their punchy titles ("At the Bathhouse," "Sartre Gets a Drubbing"); the moral-of-the-story insertions about theory's relevance to the Trump era; the high-level explanation of "de Man's reading of Derrida's reading of Rousseau" that ends with "Whew!"

Then again, a little hand-holding isn't unwelcome. Even the Frenchmen didn't always understand one another's work. "I always had the impression" that, to followers of Lacan, " 'understand' meant something different from what it meant to me," Lévi-Strauss admitted. "I'd have had to read everything five or six times." After receiving one of Derrida's student papers, Althusser, his professor, said, "I can't grade this, it's too difficult, too obscure for the *agrégation*." He gave it to Foucault, who was then an assistant professor teaching courses at the École. "Well," Foucault said. "It's either an F or an A+." The final grade is lost to history. ♦

THE FOOD-DESERT MIRAGE

Are bad diets really the result of bad options?

BY KELEFA SANNEH

What's in people's carts, reformers have insisted, reflects what's on the shelves.

Earlier this year, on Fox News, Laura Ingraham sat down with a pair of Cabinet secretaries to talk about the Trump Administration's plans to improve the way Americans eat. Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., the Secretary of Health and Human Services, unveiled an updated, inverted food pyramid, with meat at the top and whole grains at the bottom, and he explained that "highly refined carbohydrates" were "literally poisoning" America's children. (He also confessed, or maybe bragged, that he hadn't had a doughnut in more than a decade.) Brooke Rollins, the Secretary of Agriculture, said that the Administration wanted to enlist supermarkets in its campaign to change how Americans eat. Rollins said, "What we're working on, also, is those underserved communities that don't have access to a Whole Foods—"

Ingraham cut her off. "Michelle Obama called them 'food deserts,'" she said. "I kind of used to poke fun at her for that. But maybe—is she right?"

"In fact, there's part of that that's correct," Rollins said, and she outlined her efforts to use the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, to require participating retailers to increase the amount of "healthy" food on their shelves. Last summer, Jared Polis, the Democratic governor of Colorado, had said that the new SNAP rules, signed by Rollins, would "help reduce food deserts in Colorado."

The term was less familiar in 2008, when Congress passed a farm bill defining a "food desert" as an area "with limited access to affordable and nutritious food." Yet Ingraham was right to associate it with the Obama era, which began a few months later. Michelle Obama sounded an alarm in a speech from 2010: "Right now, there are 23.5 million Americans, including 6.5 million children, who live in what we call food deserts, in the inner city and in rural communities." The next year, the Obama Administration released an interactive map that identified food deserts and that outlasted many of Barack Obama's other initiatives: it lives on today as the Food Access Research Atlas. In New York, every mayor elected in this century has joined the fight: Michael Bloomberg launched a program to encourage supermarkets to open in needy areas; Bill de Blasio funded urban farms and farmers' markets; Eric Adams, celebrating hydroponic farming tanks at a Brooklyn high school, promised, "We can solve our food-desert crisis while educating our youth for the urban-agriculture careers that will drive our future." The current mayor, Zohran Mamdani, has taken a more direct approach, promising to open five city-owned grocery stores, one per borough. In April, at a press conference in East Harlem, Brad Hoylman-Sigal, the Manhattan borough president, suggested that local residents lacked "access to high-quality food" and linked this "nutrition desert" to higher rates of heart disease and diabetes.

Even as politicians from both parties have taken up the cause, though, some scholars have had second thoughts. Like many terms that migrate from academia to mainstream discourse, this one is slipperier than it seems. Food deserts are generally defined by how far residents must travel to reach a supermarket, which leads to debates about how "super" a market must be, and about which distances qualify, especially in dense cities like New York. (According to one federal metric, New York has no food deserts at all, which may be why Mamdani avoids the term.) The goal of identifying food deserts was to eliminate them, increasing residents' retail options as a way of improving their diets. But there is little evidence to support the idea that bringing supermarkets to neighborhoods that lack them has a measurable effect on what residents eat.

Five years ago, a sociologist named Kenneth Kolb published "Retail Inequality: Reframing the Food Desert Debate,"

ILLUSTRATION BY BEN WISEMAN

an insightful book that traced his journey from food-desert activist to food-desert skeptic. Kolb was teaching at Furman University, in Greenville, South Carolina, and did his field work in West Greenville and Southernside, two nearby neighborhoods that were predominantly Black and disproportionately low-income. Kolb tried to explain to residents that they lived in a food desert. They responded with a wide range of complaints about local retailers, many of which had little to do with fresh produce—one woman mentioned that it was difficult to get a pizza delivered. Kolb eventually came to see the food-desert movement as a useful fiction: a way for outsiders like him to center their own "white, middle-class" tastes, and for community leaders to get attention and secure the investments or programs that they actually want. All the same, he seemed to mourn the food-desert narrative he once believed in. "In many ways, I still wish it were true," he wrote.

Now Hanna Garth, an anthropologist, wants to see if some of these ideas might be salvaged. Her new book, "Food Justice Undone: Lessons for Building a Better Movement" (University of California), draws from her research in low-income neighborhoods in Los Angeles, where she encounters plenty of food activists but nothing she would describe as a food desert. (Early on, she quotes an activist named Andrés, who suggests that "some white liberal came up with that term while they were making some vegan organic food.") Garth is a thoroughgoing critic of "racial capitalism," but many of the activists she meets have more modest aims: they want to help a corner store sell vegetables, or they're trying to interest city residents in working on a local farm. At one point, Garth concludes that some of these efforts "could actually be worse than charity," a phrase she intends as denunciation. Despite the support of politicians, the fight against food deserts seems to have ended in disappointment. What went wrong?

Supermarkets are a fairly recent invention: before the nineteen-fifties, most Americans bought food from specialized shops or from markets full of independent venders. The rise of supermarkets helped standardize the way we shop, and perhaps popularized the idea of high-quality retail as a civil right. In 1966, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that high supermarket prices were "a major gripe of ghetto Negroes," and quoted an economist who suggested that the government should subsidize supermarket chains willing to open in poor Black neighborhoods. The next year, Congress held hearings on "supermarket operations in low-income areas," during which one congressman warned that some supermarkets might be practicing "price discrimination against the economically disadvantaged." (A witness from St. Louis testified that fruits and vegetables in an inner-city store seemed "older and dirtier" than those for sale in the suburbs.)

These investigations were partly spurred by the riots of the nineteen-sixties, which directed public attention toward interventions that might "make further riots less likely," as the *Journal* put it. After the 1992 riots in L.A., a nonprofit called Rebuild Los Angeles encouraged corporations to invest in some of the city's poorest neighborhoods; the chairman of Vons, then the region's largest supermarket chain, promised to build new stores in "neglected areas" that the company had previously avoided.

The idea of a "food desert," though, emerged not from the politics of urban America but from the U.K.; some accounts trace it to a comment made by a Scottish public-housing tenant in the early nineteen-nineties. By the decade's end, the concept was enshrined in official British policy: a government-commissioned study from 1998 warned that an exodus of supermarkets from city centers had "led to the creation of 'food deserts.'" As the term "food desert" took root in America, the imported diagnosis sometimes inspired imported solutions. In 2007, after the British grocery chain Tesco announced a plan to expand across the Atlantic, an executive, Tim Mason, told an interviewer, "One of the reasons we appeal to American politicians is because we have said we will go back into neighborhoods that have become food deserts."

Kolb finds that residents are, in fact, concerned about the lack of local supermarkets. But he came to believe that the call for a supermarket was less a demand for greater nutritional variety than a way to highlight the various indignities of living in a low-income neighborhood: not enough amenities, not enough investment, not enough respect; too many liquor stores and pawnshops. Similarly, Garth finds that the people she talks to want "newer, nicer stores," even though they don't particularly want to change what they buy or eat. Some informants tell her they like the unpretentious local markets that cater to Black or Hispanic communities.

Because most so-called food deserts are not entirely barren, sociologists have tried other terms to describe how a neighborhood might fail to properly feed its low-income residents. "Food hinterlands" are places where food is affordable but not nearby. "Food mirages" occur when food is nearby but not affordable. "Food swamps" have plenty of cheap food, but not the healthy kind. "Food apartheid" indicts the government for perpetuating a divide between the diets of the rich and the poor. "Food justice," the term Garth uses in her title, is notably ambiguous, bringing together a wide range of activists with vague or contradictory ideas about what a more just food system would look like.

Often, these overlapping movements focus on supermarkets, seen as either scourges or saviors, depending on who's telling the story. In 2013, twenty-one years after Vons pledged to return to South Central, Michelle Obama visited a Walmart in Springfield, Missouri, to thank the company for moving the country closer to "eliminating food deserts" by opening eighty-six new stores in "underserved communities." Garth is more likely to focus on the ways that big supermarkets disappoint local advocates, including in Los Angeles, where the post-riot supermarket renaissance was short-lived; at the time of her research, she counted only one Vons in the area she was studying. (Likewise, Tesco's crusade against American food deserts ended in 2013, when the company announced that it was pulling out of the United States.) Although one of Garth's interviewees mourns the closure of the Walmart on Crenshaw Boulevard, Garth herself seems more concerned that the arrival, within easy driving distance, of both a Whole Foods and an Amazon Fresh might result in "rapid development and displacement." In New York, Mamdani's city-owned grocery stores are designed to compete with existing supermarkets, by using

government funding or tax breaks to sell food more cheaply. (The proposed East Harlem store is just around the corner from a Fine Fare supermarket, part of a regional chain of independently owned and operated grocery stores.) Defending his approach, Mamdani has criticized the city's policy of subsidizing for-profit grocery stores in high-need areas, a remnant of Bloomberg's campaign against food deserts. Mamdani's vision of food justice means fighting the supermarket industry rather than helping it.

In 1936, before supermarkets conquered the world, George Orwell spent a few months living in coal-mining communities in northern England. What he found there was apparently a kind of food desert. In "The Road to Wigan Pier," the unsparing book he published about his experiences, Orwell observed that it was "usually impossible to buy wholemeal bread in a working-class district." He was happy to make the kinds of judgments that contemporary sociologists forswear, describing the meals in one lodging house as "uniformly disgusting," and writing that "the English palate, especially the working-class palate, now rejects good food almost automatically." He noted that the people he met didn't tend to eat the vegetables and fruits that nutritionists of the time recommended, and he argued that these choices didn't merely reflect what food was available, or affordable:

> The peculiar evil is this, that the less money you have, the less inclined you feel to spend it on wholesome food. A millionaire may enjoy breakfasting off orange juice and Ryvita biscuits; an unemployed man doesn't. . . . You want something a little bit "tasty." There is always some cheaply pleasant thing to tempt you. Let's have three pennorth of chips! Run out and buy us a twopenny ice-cream! Put the kettle on and we'll all have a nice cup of tea!

The point of this description was not to demean these working-class people but, rather, to show the severity of "the class problem," and the need for socialism as a way to address it. As disgusted as Orwell was by the diets he encountered, he was more disgusted by a society that condemned some of its members to live—and eat—so poorly.

In the nineteen-sixties, when Congress was investigating supermarkets, economic concerns outweighed nutritional ones: the main worry was that supermarkets in poor neighborhoods were offering low quality at high prices. The real innovation of the term "food desert" was that it redirected attention to diet while recasting some of Orwell's old concerns in new, less judgmental terms. Scholars and policymakers did not have to fulminate against "disgusting" food, or make derisive comments about the public "palate," in order to express alarm about what poor people were eating. A 1990 study in the *Journal of Human Nutrition and Dietetics*, which helped lay the groundwork for the U.K. food-desert movement, asserted that, for low-income consumers, "the extra cost of a healthy diet is likely to be a serious obstacle to healthy eating." Yet although research showed that in one low-income London neighborhood healthy food was sometimes more expensive, it contained no evidence that eating habits would change significantly if prices did. "Many urban community dwellers would love to have better eating habits," one public-health expert told the New York *Times*, in 2002—if only there were more grocery stores nearby. The article cited a study finding that Black residents who lived close to supermarkets had "healthier diets in terms of fruits and vegetables, total fat, and saturated fat," and researchers have often found a connection between people's diets and their retail environment. But it seems just as likely that the causation runs the other way—that these so-called deserts, with few places to buy food that experts deem "healthy" or "high-quality," reflect local tastes, rather than explain them.

In the food-desert literature, concerns about diet become concerns about access, a problem that's easier to measure, and to fix. If the aim is simply to make certain foods more *available*, a government-subsidized market counts as a success merely by existing, regardless of how many people shop there or what they buy. A 2019 study found that new supermarkets often siphon business from established ones, reducing shoppers' commutes without significantly changing what they buy. Kolb talked to a representative from a gas-station chain that offered sandwiches and prepared salads seemingly as a loss leader: these "healthy" options let the station brand itself as a food oasis in the desert and qualify as a store where SNAP recipients could spend their benefits on whatever they wanted. "Everybody says they want healthier food, but nobody buys it," the representative said, at a community meeting. Garth writes about enthusiastic volunteers who failed to interest local residents in kale, which isn't popular in the neighborhoods she studies; for her, this is evidence that the food-justice movement is often a "white racial project," which might mean simply that the movement has been shaped by the appetites of the people in charge of it.

What about the appetites of the local residents? Do they, like the unemployed miners Orwell met, prefer the "tasty" over the "wholesome"? Garth is surprisingly coy on this question. She takes notes as high-school students in a nutrition class list their favorite foods: "tamales, BBQ ribs, pozole, pizza, carne asada, and tortillas with butter." But she doesn't write much about fast food and junk food as such, perhaps because she values what she calls "culturally significant" foods, and distrusts outsiders who would tell the locals that they are eating wrong. Where Orwell saw the rejection of "good food" as a side effect of poverty, more recent observers offer other explanations. In "Food Justice," from 2010, the urban-policy experts Robert Gottlieb and Anupama Joshi attribute the popularity of fast food in poor neighborhoods to the influence of advertising—which was, they wrote, "particularly pronounced among vulnerable populations such as children and low-income food consumers and people of color." (If this is an attempt to avoid being patronizing, it seems ineffective; why is it less insulting to say that poor people have a childlike susceptibility to advertising than to say that they have a childlike fondness for French fries?) Kolb wrote that the people he talked to had a "taste for convenience," which he found understandable in light of their "daunting circumstances." The analysis is plausible, but it similarly brackets consumer preferences, allowing readers to imagine that the people in his book, unlike the rest of us, have no strong feelings about what they want for dinner.

A movement has strategic reasons to focus on the built environment, which can be changed through public policy,

rather than on individual choices, which can't, at least not easily. But sometimes the food-desert movement sounds conspiratorial, insisting that shadowy forces are scheming to feed hamburgers to poor people. On the left, a frequent claim is that any problem in people's diets reflects the objectives of the government-enabled businesses that profit from our hunger—the "grocery-industrial complex," as Garth puts it. But the Trump Administration has shown that this kind of criticism is not exclusively a left-wing tradition. And in February a Republican gubernatorial candidate in Florida, James Fishback, said that the presence of Pop-Tarts in school cafeterias suggested a nefarious scheme. "If you wanted to set up our kids for failure, you would feed them the absolute *goyslop* in our cafeterias," he said, using a recently coined term that portrays contemporary diets as the result of a Jewish plot. This is a particularly absurd version of a common—and comforting—idea: that no one with good options would ever make bad choices.

"I'm telling them, 'Sounds great! We'll double-check our schedule, but hopefully it'll work out!' That's a clear no, right?"

• •

Michelle Obama was determinedly friendly and upbeat in her effort to help make Americans healthier, but her husband sometimes struck a more reproachful note. During the 2008 campaign, in front of a largely Black audience in Beaumont, Texas, Barack Obama said, "We can't keep on feeding our children junk all day long," adding, "I know some of y'all, you got that cold Popeyes out for breakfast." Audiences typically cheered him on, but some scholars have been more critical. In "White Burgers, Black Cash," a 2023 book about race and the fast-food industry, Naa Oyo A. Kwate faulted Obama for making it seem as if there was "something intrinsic" about Black people's taste for fast food. "Obama's critique," Kwate wrote, "did not consider that eating fried chicken for breakfast might in fact suggest a resourceful family making the most out of meager means." This is more or less where Garth lands, too. Despite her hostility to free markets, she is instinctively respectful of the choices that her subjects make, which obliges her to be respectful, too, of the shops and restaurants they patronize. At the end of her book, she argues that terms like "food desert" have "created a sense that there is a 'crisis' that demands immediate intervention." What if there isn't?

Anyone who pays close attention to our evolving conversations about food will notice that "healthy" is a moving target. Orwell assumed that orange juice was wholesome and that hot tea was not; contemporary readers might wish to reverse those assumptions, while arguing among themselves over the status of Diet Coke. Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.,'s new food pyramid reflects changing wisdom about the relative virtues of fats and carbohydrates, and one needn't be a conspiracy theorist to suspect that, for many people, cold fried chicken is not the worst thing you can eat for breakfast. (As it happens, my wife owns a fried-chicken restaurant, and I can't say I've never breakfasted on leftover takeout.) The real question is not why most of us have a weakness for the sort of food that Orwell described as "tasty." It's how other preferences might realistically emerge and be sustained, especially amid a food economy that delivers an abundance of cheap calories. In the Obama years, social scientists assumed that our biology was fixed and that our culture was malleable, but the rise of GLP-1s may reverse this thinking—it could turn out that our chemical cravings are easier to reprogram than our cultural traditions.

Even the term "food desert" is a tribute to our success in mostly eradicating life-threatening hunger: the so-called deserts that experts surveyed may have had problems, but actual starvation was generally not among them. If the movement's energy is fading, it might be because the left-leaning experts and policymakers who once propelled it are now less willing to judge what others eat. When Mamdani announced his city-owned grocery stores in New York, he didn't promise to transform diets, just to indirectly subsidize grocery bills. These days, stern denunciations of "junk food" are more likely to emerge from the right than from the left, but this is a relatively new state of affairs, and probably a temporary one. Our ideas about which foods are "disgusting" are shaped by our cultural environments as well as our physical ones, which means that we will probably always find reasons to disparage other people's diets—and be drawn toward plans, however unrealistic, for changing them. One sensible but deflating result of recent food-desert research is that distance doesn't actually matter much. People will go to great lengths to eat what they want. ♦

THE THEATRE

DOWN TO CLOWN

Playtime in "Dukes" and "Big Feelings."

BY EMILY NUSSBAUM

In "Dukes," Liva Pierce and Jane Wickline play lovable losers who "get" each other.

The night that I attended Jane Wickline and Liva Pierce's goofball, lo-fi musical-comedy act, "Dukes," currently playing at the SoHo Playhouse, the space was muggy and uncomfortable, the air still smoky from wildfires up in Canada. But, though the atmosphere felt dystopian, the crowd was buoyant, and also unusually young for a New York theatre audience—elder Gen Z-ers with funky hair, baggy pants, and puppyish energy. They were indistinguishable from the show's two stars, who sat quietly among us, a few rows from the stage, peacefully streaming pornography.

After an announcer warned audience members to turn off their phones, the duo protested, then jumped onstage to deliver a funny, philosophical song about porn, with Wickline on keyboard. The lyrics were all about craving a better, more ambitious version of porn—not more extreme but more creative. "I want a new kind of porn that's less literal / Maybe the actors turn to Claymation in the middle—or something mixed-media like that. / Show me a porn that makes me want to take dance classes! / Show me a porn that's just a live stream of lightning flashes!" (Their boldest suggestion, which someone really should try: smut filmed in the course of twelve years, "Boyhood" style.)

The revue that followed, a satisfyingly silly buddy comedy about the go-nowhere adventures of two "dukes"—a blend of "dudes" and "dykes"—felt like its own live stream of lightning flashes, playful, illuminating, and unpretentiously experimental. As directed by Henry Hornbuckle and Mabel Lewis, it was comic spaghetti, a high proportion of which stuck. "Dukes," with its mordant queer in-jokes and janky, minor-key vaudevillian sensibility, also put a modern spin on a classic dynamic: two lovable losers who "get" each other more than anybody else gets them. It's a glorious inheritance that runs from Laverne and Shirley to Abbi and Ilana, Abbott and Costello to Romy and Michele, Bill and Ted to Barb and Star; the model relies on chemistry, as well as on a hard-to-hit blend of dumb and smart. For eighty minutes, Wickline, a "Saturday Night Live" cast member with a sweetly woeful Buster Keaton affect, and Pierce, a Second City alum who plays her delusionally suave, swaggering partner, managed to nail it.

They play best friends and roommates with bad jobs and no girlfriends, killing time in an apartment that looks like a kid's crayon drawing: a lumpy sofa, an ugly lamp, a window facing a wall of bricks. Everything feels a little askew, down to a tilted painting of two dot-eyed Victorian waifs, wearing frilled collars, whose blend of archness and innocence mirrors the dukes' own vibe. The only solid thing in the room is their friendship, with Pierce, the troublemaker, egging on their worrywart pal. "You know how I know you're a real friend? You emboldened me to start drinking again," Wickline tells Pierce, earnestly. In physical terms, they're nearly twins: each has lank, dark hair, a pale face with no makeup, and a klutzy-seductive charisma, and they lounge around in old-man slacks and loose button-downs accessorized by the odd purple fedora or tiny veiled hat. There are a bunch of solid jokes about their adjacent but not identical sexual identities; during a blow-out fight, Pierce yells, meanly but accurately, "My gender isn't that different from yours, it's just a little *more!*"

Other than that, not much happens. They sing a funny song about hating their jobs, a weird song about being firemen and saving pretty girls, and a surreal song about rescuing a lost crystal goose and winning a prize that fixes

ILLUSTRATION BY SONIA PULIDO

their lives. Between musical numbers, they collaborate on writing a double-date ad—"I have strong morals, but I often forget that I have them and unwittingly cause shocking harm to those around me"—only to have their "gorgeous dates" fall into a pizza oven. Wickline moons after a supposedly psychic neighbor (played by Pierce, in a bad wig); in a flashback, a teen-age Pierce macks on a MILF (Wickline, in a worse wig). Many of their best bits are throwaway gags, like the revelation that Wickline works at a nonprofit called KeepTabs, "a resource to people who want to track whether someone else has taken their pill," or Pierce's irritable complaint "That's the worst we've ever been heckled at a funeral."

Not every moment clicks—a scene in which Pierce "cucked" Wickline turned the knob from kooky to creepy—but not everything has to work for the show to deliver. "Dukes" has a few obvious comedic antecedents, among them the goofus duos behind "Nirvanna the Band the Show the Movie" and "Flight of the Conchords," and also the melancholic viral-video virtuoso Bo Burnham. Like their spiritual older brothers from the Lonely Island, the dukes' sweet spot is groovy, digressive musical numbers that parody pop-funk (although theirs have a folksier edge). Still, by the show's end, the duo's rueful existentialism, their sense of bemused Gen Z paralysis in a burning world, reminded me just as much of my own generation's wryest observational standup, Steven Wright, a masterly deliverer of monotone gags such as "I intend to live forever. So far, so good."

In one of my favorite sequences, Wickline, in a rage at her compulsive scrolling, impulsively throws her phone into the Hudson River—then realizes that she can't figure out how to get back home or how to pay for the C train. She winds up taking a pedicab while grooving to a Bruno Mars song that she can't quite identify, a spontaneous adventure that bears some resemblance to the evening itself. Sometimes you just enjoy the sound of a person's voice.

To see an even younger crowd, you can catch Ryan Drake's "Big Feelings," an unnerving interactive play in which audience members are deputized to play a class of first graders. When you arrive, you get handed a nametag—mine said "Primrose." Upstairs, at the Cell Theatre's gallery space, you enter a tidy, sunny first-grade classroom, where you are told to place your bag in a cubby that's been pre-labelled with your new name. At your desk, there's a printed page with an assignment: draw a picture of a time you lost control. Excited, I doodled a picture of myself weeping because Air France had lost my luggage. By the time the "teacher" showed up, I'd entered an eerie, almost narcotic state, suspended between my first-grade self and my adult one.

In an elementary-school classroom, you feel simultaneously safe and vulnerable, subject to someone else's control and open to their guidance. In a theatre, it's a little bit the same. The teacher, played skillfully by Julia Greer, initially came across as a wonderful role model—sweet, enthusiastic, gently authoritative, a little twee. But cracks quickly appeared, beginning with the alternately harsh and nurturing approach she took toward a student named Nico, whose presence was indicated by only an empty stool. "You're not being safe with your body. Disrupting class with comments!" she chided him, urging him not to disappoint her. It felt like a message to us all: Don't let me down.

A few minutes in, the teacher delivered some disturbing news: this would be her last day in our classroom. Step by step, her boundaries began to drop. A darker story started to emerge—something about her father, something about a soccer game—a hidden narrative ominously encoded in each of our lessons, in her math problems and vocabulary drills and storybook reading. Still, we had to play along: raise our hands, sit crisscross applesauce. These revelations, I must say, left me doubting that, had any of this happened in a real school, the teacher would be allowed to say goodbye to the class. But, if the show's details didn't entirely hold together, it mattered very little, because the theatrical experience was so compelling. It felt scary, in a powerful way, to get dropped into the body of a small child—and to feel that escape could come only with the ringing of a bell. ♦

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THE CURRENT CINEMA

SUB STORY

"I Want Your Sex."

BY JUSTIN CHANG

As you might suspect from the title, "I Want Your Sex" has no time for niceties. Right at the start, it serves up a generous helping of hot mess, with a stream of expletives, a jolt of violence, and what appears to be a corpse adrift in a Los Angeles swimming pool. You may think, as I did, of "Sunset Boulevard" (1950), but here the Joe Gillis character, a gingery-haired twentysomething named Elliot (Cooper Hoffman), is alive, and it's his Norma Desmond counterpart who is floating face down. "Oh, fuck. Oh, fuck," Elliot mutters, as he stumbles upon the sight of his former boss, the artist Erika Tracy (Olivia Wilde), bobbing nude in the water. How she got there is just one of the story's mysteries. Like, why is Elliot's face smeared with blood? And why is he wearing a lacy pink bra and panties?

Olivia Wilde and Cooper Hoffman star in Gregg Araki's film.

The answer is that this is a Gregg Araki movie, meaning that a character needs no more reason to don skimpy, rose-colored undergarments than he would to strap on a collar and crawl on all fours. The film revolves around a dominant-submissive relationship, and Elliot, who's genial, scruffy, and broke, is the designated sub. The dom is Erika, who has made a reputation for herself as a sexually provocative art-world libertine, and who, as the story proper begins, hires Elliot as her assistant. It's through his wide, impressionable eyes that Araki's goofily scrambled nympho-noir plot comes into focus. On an average day, Elliot might find himself painting a sculpted phallus or festooning a sketch of a vagina with pieces of half-chewed gum, usually alongside his co-worker Zap (Mason Gooding), a hot, gay, and snarky voice of sanity. On a wilder day, which soon becomes the new average, Erika summons Elliot to her office or her mansion, where she proceeds to fuck him and fuck with him, seldom in that order.

A frenzied, if none too explicit, montage lays out a menu of bondage-themed delights: Erika ties Elliot up, spanks him, rides him, penetrates him, and, most of all, mocks him. Again and again, she dings him for his naïveté and inexperience—qualities that she imputes to his entire sorry-ass generation, which seems to be less knowledgeable about, or interested in, sex than ever. Araki wrote the script with the former *Vogue* sex-and-relationships columnist Karley Sciortino, and their sharpest scene allows Elliot to defend his age group against charges of prudishness: they came of age, after all, during a pandemic that conditioned them to fear the very idea of in-person socialization, let alone physical intimacy. (That they also grew up during an online porndemic scarcely needs mentioning.) But Elliot's best argument is ultimately himself—chiefly, his own vigorous libido, which his workaholic medical-student girlfriend, Minerva (a deader-than-deadpan Charli XCX), has long since lost interest in satiating. Minerva doesn't stick around, but Elliot still yearns for happily ever after, a dream that he transfers, delusionally, to Erika, believing that their arrangement might one day flower into long-term domestic bliss.

That's ridiculous, but, cheerfully and unabashedly, so is "I Want Your Sex." The verbal and visual building blocks of Araki's comedy—quick-witted one-liners, exuberant sex scenes, sartorial gags, garish décor—express a dazzling, totalizing sense of optimism. Hoffman's lummoxy charisma fits right into this scheme and makes it hard to begrudge Elliot even his more vanilla fantasies. Hoffman had an auspicious screen début in Paul Thomas Anderson's "Licorice Pizza" (2021), which was also premised on a younger-man-older-woman dynamic, albeit one that was sedulously, almost distractingly chaste. His character in that film had a gawky teen-age bravado, a precocious man-of-the-world assurance. Elliot is completely in over his head by comparison, but Hoffman himself feels fully and gamely in his element; if his improbability as a romantic lead is part of the joke, it never comes at the actor's expense. Elliot may be just a "boy whore" to Erika—in one scene, she pimps him out to a friend (Roxane Mesquida), who rejects the offering with supremely French disdain—but he also elicits from her an unexpected tenderness, a sneaky affection, that the audience comes to share.

How we feel about Erika is harder to clamp down. Some of her verbal

ILLUSTRATION BY RICARDO DISEÑO

provocations have a reactionary tilt; she rolls her eyes at the "woke police," waves aside issues of consent, and insinuates that the whole point of sex is the eradication of boundaries. But she also has a dry self-awareness, a willingness to puncture her bad-girl reputation and the extravagances of the art world. "Contemporary art is a scam," she declares; later, she calls herself "a pretentious whore from hell." Whether or not she's joking, Wilde makes the character a devilish hoot, and not just because the first outfit we see her in is a slinky red number that might as well come with a forked tail.

It's a measure of Wilde's range that, in her recent marital comedy, "The Invite"—which, like "I Want Your Sex," premièred at this year's Sundance Film Festival—she played a housewife who was both tickled and intimidated by the prospect of swinging with the neighbors. Erika wouldn't bat an eye at the suggestion. In the story's trickiest development, she orders Elliot to bring a friend to their next assignation, and he unwisely chooses his female bestie and roommate, Apple (Chase Sui Wonders), who seems eager to get in on the action. ("Why does all the cool sex-deviant stuff always happen to you?" she asks.) But the attempted three-way that follows is a bummer, for the characters and for us, and for reasons that, more than anything, smack of narrative expedience. Long-term relational unsustainability has become the default endgame of B.D.S.M.-themed romances—think of "Babygirl" and "Pillion," to take two recent examples—and "I Want Your Sex" proves no exception. Instead of risking an unfettered exploration of the thrills and limitations of impromptu throupling, the movie contrives to push Erika and Elliot to a crisis point, and to imply that, even in the most depersonalized physical exchange, there are always strings attached.

Araki has often named his characters with wily playfulness. His surreal, harrowing "Nowhere" (1997) featured characters named Dark, Lucifer, Egg, Jujyfruit, and Handjob. The director paid tribute to Jean-Luc Godard, one of his main inspirations, in "The Living End" (1992), a road movie about two gay men named Jon and Luke. With this context in mind, the name Erika evokes one of the great dominatrices in literature and cinema: Erika Kohut, the icily repressed protagonist of Elfriede Jelinek's novel "The Piano Teacher" (1983) and Michael Haneke's film adaptation, from 2001. (The other allusions in "I Want Your Sex" aren't so lofty; in one cheeky nod to a trash-cinema touchstone, the flashbacks kick off with a title card that reads "9 1/2 WEEKS AGO.") But it's also hard not to interpret Erika, with her passionate doctrine of sexual liberation, as a fictional stand-in for her creator. When she tells Elliot that "sex is everything," she might as well be articulating Araki's own mission statement.

Araki's concerns about the sexual habits and mores (or lack thereof) of today's youth extend to the increasingly puritanical, sex-negative tendencies of so much contemporary cinema, an unfortunate trend to which "I Want Your Sex" means to serve as a corrective. But it's certainly a slicker, lighter, less subversive kind of corrective than, say, "Totally F***ed Up" (1994), "The Doom Generation" (1995), and "Nowhere"—the daring independent films that constitute his foundational "Teen Apocalypse Trilogy," which propelled him into the forefront of America's burgeoning queer-cinema movement. He has undeniably mellowed in the decades since, though in works like "Kaboom" (2011) and "Now Apocalypse," his TV series from 2019, he has continually returned to his doomsday preoccupations. The end of the world remains, for him, a potent metaphor for the cataclysmically unstable nature of youthful sexual discovery.

In "I Want Your Sex," the director's first feature in more than a decade, the genre is noir rather than science fiction, and it's in this choice, I think, that Araki's kooky conception ultimately runs aground. Much of the story is narrated by Elliot, in flashback, to a pair of straitlaced cops, who are played by Margaret Cho and Johnny Knoxville; it's fun enough to see them that you wish they both had more to do, besides stoking the audience's nostalgia for an earlier generation of outrage artists. The film's twisty wrap-up feels creaky and far-fetched in ways that the rest of the movie, over the top though it is, does not, and you can sense Araki struggling to bring his two leads, and their oppositional schools of sexual thought, to a place of convergence. No wonder the film, flippantly but not unpleasantly, ends on a question mark—a shrug suggesting that, if sex is everything, Araki still has stamina to burn. Should we get lucky, the mystery of desire is one he'll never stop trying to solve. ♦

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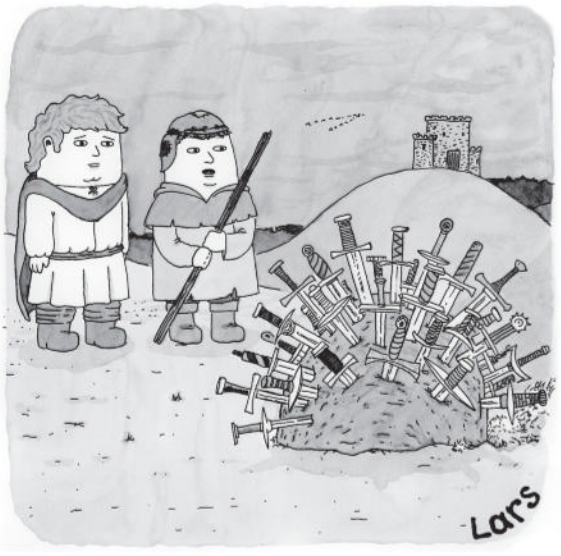

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THE FINALISTS

"Is this what you pictured when you hid in my luggage?"
Jill Sterbakov, Drexel Hill, Pa.

"To be fair, you don't like anything."
Ryan Ulrich, North Arlington, N.J.

"This is going much better than our bird-watching trip."
Pavi Chance, Seattle, Wash.

THE WINNING CAPTION

"If he were responsible, he'd carry some napkins."
J. M. Novokmet, Toronto, Ont.

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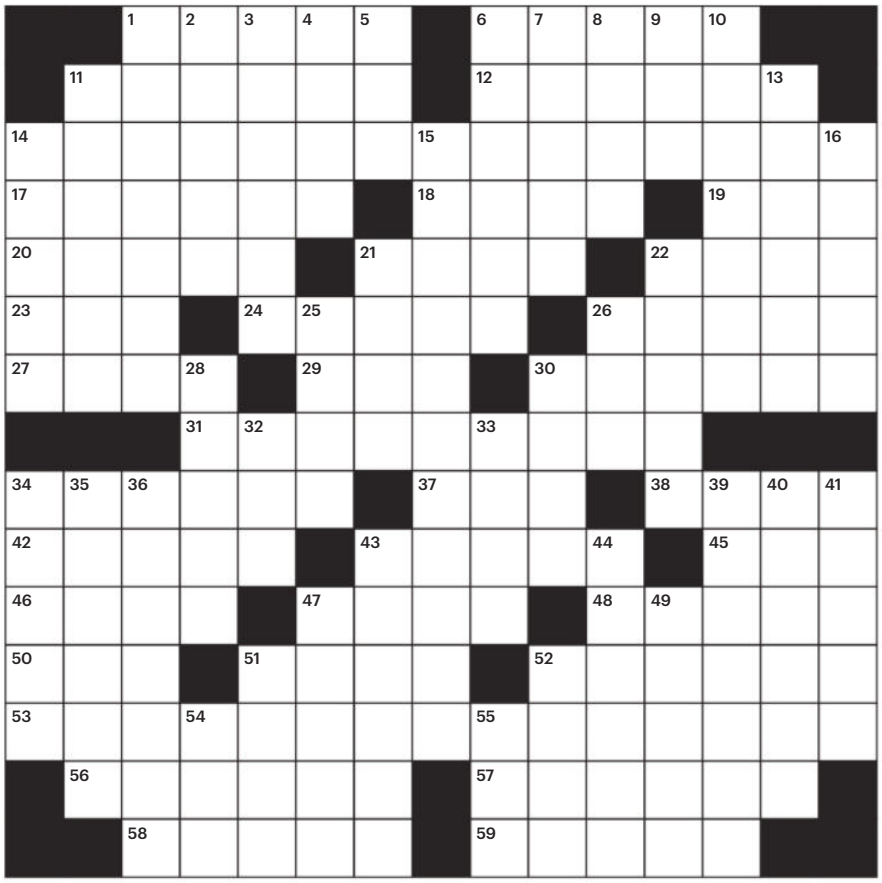
A beginner-friendly puzzle.

BY CAITLIN REID



ACROSS

1 Remedies
6 College student's declaration
11 Nursery-rhyme character who lost her sheep
12 "Sort of . . ."
14 Siblings who avoid getting baked?
17 M.L.B. team that plays home games in Anaheim
18 Verses of praise
19 Mai ___ (rum cocktail)
20 Enjoy a roller rink
21 V.I.P. at a première
22 "Rats!"
23 Hollywood's Holland or Hanks
24 Temporary holdup
26 Word after bullet or boiling
27 Over again
29 "Rub-a-dub-dub, three men in a ___"
30 Bold and brash, slangily
31 "Sound familiar?"
34 Desert that covers most of northern Africa
37 Mother deer?
38 Cries uncontrollably
42 Clichéd plot device
43 Breath fresheners
45 Family dog, for example
46 Has a meal
47 Created
48 End of the Greek alphabet
50 "Frontline" network
51 ___ mortal
52 Achieves a goal, say?
53 Ethical code named for an ancient Greek physician
56 Compel
57 Warning signals
58 Gripping part of a tire or shoe
59 Like the gods Loki and Thor

DOWN

1 Swindler's scheme
2 March Madness bracket buster, maybe
3 Reacted to shocking news
4 Slithery swimmers
5 Relaxation destination
6 Noon
7 Tick off
8 Glass containers in a pantry
9 Be behind on payment
10 Hair style that's long and skinny in the back
11 Place trust in
13 Hankers (for)
14 "___ la vista, baby" (line from "Terminator 2")
15 "That just might work"
16 Covered with bits of fuzz
21 Cousin of a snail
22 Barbies, e.g.
25 Europe's tallest active volcano
26 Friend
28 Finishes filming
30 Root vegetable with a Detroit Dark Red variety
32 Wrath
33 Part of a skeleton
34 Curry of the Golden State Warriors
35 Official language of Egypt
36 Device that provides Wi-Fi access
39 Run, as a machine
40 Brings about
41 Squirrelled-away supply
43 Damaged
44 Lionel Messi's sport
47 Holy city in Islam
49 Secures, as a boat
51 "Less is ___"
52 Agricultural storage structure
54 According to
55 Get some sun

Solution to the previous puzzle:

T	A	M	E	D	■	C	L	A	R	A	■	W	A	S
S	C	A	R	E	Q	U	O	T	E	S	■	A	P	E
K	U	N	G	F	U	M	O	V	I	E	■	T	I	E
E	T	E	■	L	A	I	N	■	S	P	R	E	A	D
D	E	T	R	A	I	N	■	E	S	T	E	R	S	■
■	■	■	A	T	L	■	F	R	U	I	T	B	A	T
S	H	E	R	E	■	T	R	U	E	C	R	I	M	E
L	O	C	I	■	S	E	E	P	S	■	E	L	O	N
E	R	O	T	I	C	A	R	T	■	S	A	L	A	D
D	O	M	I	N	A	T	E	■	K	I	T	■	■	■
■	S	M	E	L	T	S	■	M	E	T	S	F	A	N
I	C	E	S	I	T	■	L	A	I	C	■	R	O	O
N	O	R	■	M	E	M	E	N	T	O	M	O	R	I
N	P	C	■	B	R	E	A	T	H	M	I	N	T	S
S	E	E	■	O	S	A	K	A	■	S	A	T	A	Y

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Le Brassus

ROYAL OAK

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